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THOMPSON

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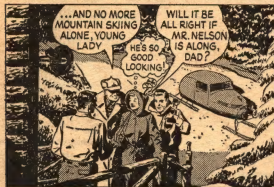
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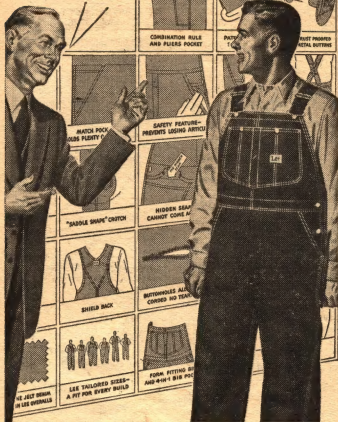
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PUBLISHED
MAY 10TH

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MAY, 1950

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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MEDICINE MAN

By DALE CLARK

Dangerous Johnny Hogan had a gun-fighter's rep to protect when he rode into a bandit's trap—set by his own six-shooter.

THE blackbearded driver cracked his whip, and the stagecoach rolled out onto Yaqui Canyon's sand and cacti floor. On the top back seat, with \$25,000 of the Company's placer dust in the padlocked iron strongbox, sat small, neat, dangerous Johnny Hogan, riding shotgun guard; beside him clung the lone passenger.

"Mr. Hogan, sir," the passenger had said, boarding the stage, "my card." *Willmar Sibley, Professor of Physiology, Phrenology, and Ventriloquism—lectures free, introducing Royal Egyptian Pharaoh Remedy to the inhabitants of the Great American Desert.*

The man's a misfit weakling, Johnny Hogan knew. No worry about him.

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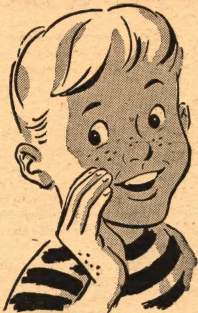
"Railroad," said Professor Sibley.

"Going to be," said Johnny.

"Very soon, too. I hear they are laying

(Please continue on page 8)

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the track as fast as a man can walk." The professor was a fat man, no longer young, theatrically rococo in dress and manner. A white derby's brim curled up foppishly from his plumply soft face. His canary yellow waistcoat hung open and disclosed the frivolity of a pleated shirt bosom. His trousers were puce, and his shoes needle-toed, with suede, pearl buttoned uppers.

"It's progress," said Willmar Sibley, philosophically. "It's the march of civilization." But behind the advancing rails the Company was laying off its stage lines, drivers, and guards. The survey stakes marked an invasion of what was, in a unique sense, Johnny's empire. He was a veteran gunfighter, belonging to the clan of frontier marshals, sheriffs, and deputies, each engaged in quelling his portion of the turbulent Southwest. Johnny's portion was two hundred miles of stage trail, and he ruled over it by right of moral conquest and according to the gunfighter's rigid code. He only spilled blood when the other man opened the play. It had taken a few funerals to drive home the moral but then, lesser men had come to see in small, neat, dangerous Johnny Hogan the personification of swift, retributive justice.

"Destiny," said Professor Sibley, and Johnny closed his ears to the florid voice, watching the flagged stakes approach a peeled cottonwood corral and 'dobe stage station. Blackbearded Frank Berry pulled up his winded, weary horses.

But now it was clear that civilization, won with the blood of Johnny's breed, had no use for Johnny's kind. The old era was ending; in the new, a six-shooter specialist could be only a has-been, a legend quickly dimmed in this land of ancient, dim legends. Johnny saw a direct affront in the matter, and for months he had experimented with padlocks, for days had kept a saddle horse hidden in a tiny, watered arroyo up Yaqui Canyon's head.

(Please continue on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

He swung down and, while Frank Berry and the station-boss led fresh horses from the corral, Johnny lifted out the swingle-bar's already loosened clevis pin; he put in another filed three-quarters through.

\$25,000 was just the right-sized haul, Johnny thought. It was the maximum load, all of the ungrateful Company's gold a fleeing horseman could carry, riding fast enough to cross the Border ahead of a posse. Johnny mounted to his seat.

At Yaqui Canyon's head, the trail climbed steeply, and the horses, barely broken to harness, leaped and plunged under Berry's whip. The pin snapped, and there was a melee of rearing animals, kicking hooves, flying doubletrees. A swingle-bar chain loosened, and the pole broke as a ton of crazed horseflesh stampeded around a half-circle. The second chain kicked free, and, freed, the horses ran.

"Those broncs won't quit running this side of the Gila," said Johnny Hogan. "Frank, you and the professor hike back to the station. Bring up the other team. You can cut a pole out of the corral." He expected to be obeyed; his plans depended upon lesser men's habit of obedience.

It was a closely planned thing. He gave these men a couple of hours on their errand, but Johnny would need that long to reach his arroyo. For the rest, he reckoned they'd be puzzled, finding the stagecoach deserted, the strongbox intact.

"If you don't mind," said Professor Sibley, "I shall remain here." Johnny ought to have foreseen the passenger would balk at putting foot to a long, hot trail; this man would have to be spurred by fear.

Johnny stooped over the broken clevis pin. "Look here. You know who'd wreck a stage? Bandits." He saw the professor's plump face pale under the foppish hat brim. "You stay here, and you're liable to get killed."

It was preposterous; it was incredible;

Willmar Sibley manfully squared his shoulders. "I have a pistol in my trunk, Mr. Hogan," said he shrilly. "I shall sell my life as dearly as I can."

"Johnny," said blackbearded Frank Berry, "I'll make it quicker alone," and was off, half-running, down the trail.

The professor stumbled behind the stage, fumbled with the trunk lashed there. Johnny followed. For all the heat, there was a damp of sweat on Johnny's face. He could not pick the padlock and walk off with the gold sacks and leave a witness alive on the scene. "It's not your fight," Johnny said. "What's your call to die for the Company's dust?"

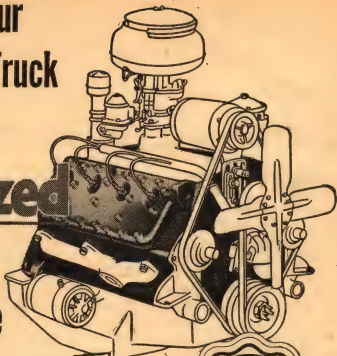
The passenger dived under the trunk lid and drew forth a cap-and-ball Derringer. Brandishing the obsolete firearm, he cried: "It is a matter of principle. If I may say so, a question of personal honor."

"You're the biggest fool alive," grumbled Johnny, but there was a dismaying valor in the folly. It might be considered that the misfit weakling was the better man of the two. Down in Mexico, in the years ahead, it might seem so to Johnny himself. The gold no longer looked so attractive, if it had to be gained at the cost of Johnny's feeling inferior to anyone in point of valor. "I reckon maybe it's for the best," he said, and suddenly felt himself again, clear of worry, and easy on the trigger.

Professor Willmar Sibley heard that easy note gladly, because the professor was drawing all his courage from a shining legend. He was a fraud and a coward, of course, but in that empire of cacti and sand Johnny had no more devoted admirer than this fat, frightened man.

"In any event," said the professor, "confound it, I shan't abandon you in this crisis," but he would have taken to his heels, except for the strong medicine he found in the presence and example that was small, neat, dangerous Johnny Hogan

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

May 10th

Howdy, Folks . . . **LAST STAGE TO HELL** by John M. Cunningham, is next month's trigger feature. Young Tod Lee had the mail run contract from Piute Canyon to Elkhorn, but if he didn't keep the schedule, his contract would not be renewed. . .



Five minutes before the mail stage was scheduled to leave, Lee found his only driver stretched out on the floor of the saloon—drugged by a Mickey—and in no condition to take the stage through to Elkhorn.



Lee discovered his enemy was Brantley, father of Janice whom he hoped to marry if his stage-line succeeded. His determination to get the renewal and win Janice, led him into a blazing trap set by the unscrupulous rancher.



When Janice told her father that she would warn Tod about the death-trap which had been laid, Brantley locked her in her room. But she quickly out-witted Niven, her guard—overcoming him with a chunk of stovewood.



Later, Niven said to Lee, "You'd better let me speak my piece or you'll kill Janice if you take the stage through the canyon!" This complete thrill-packed, full length novel will appear in the June issue.

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CHAPTER

Enemies' Reunion

1

The land was soggy and drab from a week long drizzle and the five hundred head of cattle, bedded now for the night, were restless with five hundred reasons. A grumbling, make shift crew, the only help Cal Herren had been able to gather, was sick of the job before it had even started. The men knocked scraps from

their tin plates and tossed the utensils into a wooden tub. The night guard mounted and rode out to the bed ground and Cal, silent as always, watched them go and felt their dislike for him in the thickening darkness. In time he heard their voices as they circled the herd and the sound that should have been music set up a gnawing discomfort. He was getting sick of taking seconds because a bullheaded girl had branded him a rustler and a killer.

A DRIFTER

*Willful Vyda Smith branded Cal Herren a rustler and a killer—
until they found themselves trapped in a vicious range
conflict fired by the treachery of turncoat gunmen.*

By

● **THOMAS THOMPSON** ●



A rider broke out of the
cottonwoods

The cook threw a mesquite branch on the fire and the sparks reached up like a hungry claw, outlining the man's horsey face. He spoke over his shoulder, a thin, dry man with a thin, dry voice, and there was no actual interest in the question he asked. "Have enough to eat, boss?"

"Plenty," Cal Herren said. "Get her ready to move in the morning." He had grown sparing in his speech these last three years. He seldom said anything un-



less it had something to do with the business at hand.

He went to the wagon then and found his bed roll and spread it for the first time in two nights, and he listened to the sound of his herd. They were mustang cattle, these brutes he had raised, brockled outlaws and mossy horned renegades sired by strays from a dead man's herd. The first dozen or so had been strays with blotted brands or yearlings with no brand apparent. He had taken them for his own, rather than let them return to a wild state, and because of that she called him a rustler. Her father had been killed about the time Cal came into this country and because of that she called him a killer. She was wrong on both counts, but arguing with Vyda Smith was somewhat like arguing with a blue norther. You could make a lot of noise but you didn't accomplish much.

He told himself he no longer worried about it, but he knew that was a lie. The trouble was still there; it would be there when he tried to move this herd in the morning. But he would move them regardless, for they were his cows, hand raised from a small beginning, and he planned to keep them his cows—in spite of her Rafter S.

He was half way through a second cigarette when he heard the riders coming. He knew it was not his own men and he was not surprised. He had known they would be here; he just hadn't known when they would be here. He tried to find some encouragement in the fact that they had come this soon and he caught himself wondering if the girl would be with them. That thought disturbed him more than it should have. He pinched out the cigarette and was standing by the fire when the two riders came in.

It was a greeting between old enemies, this meeting between Cal Herren and Darcy Clayton, foreman for the Rafter S. Cal didn't like a man who lied, and Darcy

Clayton did that. Clayton swung easily from his saddle, a good looking, free moving man, and he kicked the fire into life with the toe of his boot. "Look's like you're ready to move," he said. He was tossing the gauntlet to Cal.

"In the morning," Cal said.

Reno Blair, Darcy Clayton's *segundo*, did not bother to dismount. He leaned forward in his saddle, a thick man with heavy shoulders and a wide face. His yellow slicker made him a shapeless bulk in the thin light. He spit between his wide spaced front teeth and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"She said to give you one more chance," Darcy Clayton said. It was supposed to draw an answer. Cal refused to take the bait. Darcy waited until the silence was thick and then he said, "She said to offer you ten dollars a head."

"At least she's admitting they're mine to sell," Cal said.

"Maybe," Darcy said. "I haven't said so."

"What you say or think don't make a damn to me," Cal said.

"Is that your answer?" Clayton said.

"It's close enough," Cal said.

Reno Blair moved his weight for the first time. He said, "We did what we could." Reno had a voice that had been scorched raw by whiskey and weather. It always grated against Cal's nerves. Cal had never decided for sure just how dangerous Reno Blair might be and that bothered him. Darcy was easier to read. Darcy Clayton would double-cross his own mother.

"You got something else to say?" Cal asked. He directed his question at Darcy.

"Yeah," Clayton said. "Don't move 'em."

"And if I do?"

"There's a way to find out," Darcy said. He flipped a stirrup across the saddle, ran his hand under the cinch, dropped the stirrup and mounted. He was insolent in

his disregard of Cal. He could afford to be as long as Blair kept his hand on his gun. The Rafter S foreman mounted, turned his horse and rode into the darkness and Reno Blair followed. Neither man looked back. They knew that Cal's crew was there, knew they had heard, but it made little difference. They knew also that Cal's crew had no heart for this. They'd quit if they had half a chance. Cal watched the Smith riders disappear into the darkness and then he called two of his men.

The men got out of their blankets, grumbling, feigning sleep. Cal knew it was a pose; they had listened to the threat. He said, "Extra guard tonight."

He heard the mutterings of one of the men and a quick tightness came to Cal's stomach muscles. Under different circumstances he would have knocked hell out of the man and given him his pay. Now he had to take it. He caught up his own horse and he knew that the two men he had called were working near him there in the damp night. He said, "Coffee up before we go out if you want."

"Damn white of yuh," one of the men said, and Cal let his fingers grip the roll of the saddle until the tension was gone, then he reined around and headed out toward the bed ground. He found two of his night riders huddled together under a tree, having a smoke. One of the men stood up, his guilt in the quickness of his movement. The other man didn't bother.

CAL sat there and the water dripped down from the brim of his hat and splashed against his slicker. He said only, "If you're that tired, go on back to the wagon and turn in." He rode on and he knew that the man who had remained hunkered down was grinning at his back in the darkness. He had watched that man closely. A drifter he had picked up

in the town—Arizona by name. A man with a lot of trails behind him; a man with two guns and a willingness to hire them for money. He turned his horse and rode closer to the black blot of the massed cattle, then reining up he waited until the two men he had called rode out from the wagon. He gave them their orders and rode up the canyon that opened out into Smith range, needing to be alone. He'd have to take his cows this way in the morning. He figured this was where she'd try to stop him.

Sometimes when he thought of Vyda Smith he forgot that she was fighting him and remembered that she was a woman. A beautiful woman, a few years younger than himself. At such times the hopelessness of his situation was a galling sore, for there was no outlet, no solution. She had done what she could to break him; she had let him know that she wasn't sure he hadn't murdered her father.

But at the same time she had prevented any actual showdown simply by being a woman. She had suggested that his credit be cut off at the store, and it was promptly cut off. She had made no attempt to control a small brush fire on her range and it had crossed the hill and burned his meadow hay. She had fenced off a water hole and he had spent days herding his helpless, bawling brutes ten miles north to new water. If it had been Darcy Clayton and Reno Blair he was fighting . . . But Clayton and Blair merely did their work and avoided open trouble. It often struck Cal that Clayton and Blair had bigger things on their mind than the mere breaking of a small time mavericker who worked the breaks north of Rafter S.

Some, when they spoke of the big ranch across the hills, said, "The Smith outfit is doing this or doing that." Some said, "Vyda is doing this or doing that." It made little difference; they were one and the same. For Vyda Smith was completely a part of her outfit. It was a pledge she

had made to herself the day her father was killed. She had been eighteen then. She was twenty one now. She had never forgotten her promise.

Men argued over whether or not Vyda Smith was pretty. Her hair was black, her eyes a puzzling blue. She rode with her men, hired them and fired them, roped with the best of them, and some said she rolled her own cigarettes and could out-cuss the best of them. No one knew for sure how much was truth and how much was fiction, for no one actually knew Vyda Smith. She had become a sort of challenge to Cal and he knew that the interest was gradually going beyond cows and disputed water holes. It was a lonely country and women were few. And Vyda Smith was the kind of woman a strong man would want.

He rode to the top of a bare hill and now the darkness ahead of him was a deep blanket of mist. He couldn't see through it but it had the quality of openness about it. The plain was too big to be closed off by darkness. Around him the night was lumpy with the rolling hills that shouldered back into the breaks where he ran his own beef on land that was any man's. A breeze stirred and whipped the fine mist across his face and again he thought of Vyda Smith. She was willing to fight for her way of life; he was willing to fight for his. And they both wanted the same thing, so why should they clash? The killing of her father? That was only a peg. He wasn't guilty and he could prove it if the need ever arose. There was no answer. He reined his horse and rode slowly back toward his own cattle.

He didn't hear the gun shot. It was smothered too quickly by the greater sound that followed. At first he told himself it was thunder. He told himself that, because that was what he wanted to believe. But he knew what it was and it was like an explosion inside him breaking

nerves he had held in check for three long years. He felt the shake of the earth. He smelled the danger and heard the bawl of the half-wild brutes. And then he rode toward it and into it, one lone man against the tossing horns of five hundred fear-crazed steers. He jerked his six-shooter from its holster and started firing into the air and he did not hear the explosions of the gun. She had started already. This was a woman's way of fighting. And somewhere there was a way to fight back!

There was no passage of time for Cal Herren. There was only the earth shaking jar of panicked hooves, the gleaming horns that seemed to reach out for him. It was an unreasoning charge of wild brutes and yet there was a plan to it. They ran in a fixed direction, and they had been started in that direction. Straight through the pass and out onto Smith range where the Rafter S cattle were bunched for the trail north.

At first the surge of unleashed emotion drove him on and he tried to turn five hundred steers single-handed. But in time the utter futility of it brought reason and his only thought was to save himself so that he could fight again. He swerved his horse out of the path of the maddened herd that had carried him along for more than a mile. The horse stumbled and fell and threw him against the soggy muck of the ground. Instinctively he covered his head with his arms and the cloven hooves drummed by until it seemed they would never stop.

He got to his feet finally, shaken and bruised, and he knew that the herd had passed him and was now hopelessly mingled with the Smith herd being held on the other side of the pass. He scraped the mud from his face with a hand that trembled and he found his horse. After that his first thought was to see what damage had been done, what part of his crew remained. Worthless or not, they

were his men and it mattered to him.

He rode back to where he had left the chuck wagon and the remuda and the glare of a new fire was reassuring. The cook was there, limping badly, his clothes and face streaked with mud. He was making a pot of coffee. The others were there around the fire. He took a quick tally, saw they were all there, and he spotted Arizona and the young kid named Gimble. Beyond the fire one man was saddling his private horse. Cal watched the man and saw him ride away, his gear in his bed roll, quitting without bothering to ask for his pay. Cal tried to put confidence into his voice. "Quite a show," he said. He saw Arizona grin.

Jack Wells, a nervous, inadequate man, said. "It's a hoodoo outfit."

Cal shook his head. "You expect stampedes the first week, don't you? We'll round 'em up."

"Hell, man," Wells complained. "They are in with Rafter S stuff now. We try to cut her herd she'll have us all blasted to hell."

"Do what you want," Cal said. He walked over to the fire and picked up the steaming coffee pot. When he had poured a cup he hunkered down and blew across the black liquid. "After breakfast," he said, "I'm going after my cows. There's double pay in Dodge to anyone who wants to give me a hand."

He said no more about it and after he had his breakfast he saw that Arizona, young Gimble and the cook were the only ones who hadn't made some move to leave. He went to the wagon and took out a strongbox he had there. "You boys that are quitting," he said, "can come and draw your pay."

CARLTON, a tall, thick shouldered man, came forward slowly. He said, "I risked my damn neck for you last night."

Cal looked at the former Rafter S man,

counted out his pay and said, "It's just as well you're quitting, Carlton. You're a trouble maker. I would have had to kick you out sooner or later."

"You talk big," Carlton said.

Cal handed across the money. "You were on the south side of the herd with Keith, weren't you?" he asked. "What happened?"

A slight flush of color crawled across Carlton's swarthy face. "How do I know what happened?" Carlton said. "They're a bunch of outlaws. They decided to run."

"Besides being a trouble maker," Cal said, "you're a damn liar. How much did she pay you to squeeze off that shot that started them?"

Carlton made a blustering sound through his lips. "No man calls me a liar." He lurched to one side quickly and swung a roundhouse blow. Cal saw it coming in plenty of time. He turned his body, put his weight behind the swing and clipped Carlton on the side of the head. Carlton stumbled over his own feet and fell. He lay still for a second and then made a grab for his gun. Cal kicked. The toe of his boot caught Carlton's wrist and sent the gun spinning into the mud.

"Give her my regards when you see her," Cal said. He gripped Carlton by the belt, jerked the man to his feet and shoved him.

Across the fire Arizona was smiling. He came over to lean against the chuck wagon, took out a pocket knife and began paring his nails. He jerked his head toward Carlton and said, "That's why I never fight with my fists. There's always somebody who can hit harder."

"You want your pay?" Cal asked.

Arizona snapped the knife shut and shrugged his shoulders. "Double pay in Dodge?" He ran his palm across his lips. "It's the best offer I've had yet," he said. "I'll stick around until something better comes along." He picked up a rope, made a loop and walked off toward the

remuda. Watching him go Cal knew that Arizona's answer was no mere figure of speech. Arizona was a man who worked for money. It would make little difference to him what brand he rode for.

He helped the cook straighten up and then said, "Hitch up the team and bring the wagon along. As soon as I get my cows we'll keep right on moving."

The cook shook his head. "Not me, Cal. I'm too old for it."

"Gimble?" Cal spoke the name sharply.

The kid shifted his feet. He had been watching Arizona, waiting to see what the drifter would do. Gimble had all the marks. He had killed a man in a saloon brawl, perhaps. At times he considered himself a dangerous gunman; at times he wasn't sure. In Arizona he had spotted the real thing for the first time and he was like any other hero worshiping kid. He lifted his gun belt, spit at the ground and said, "I'll stick until something better comes along."

An hour later they rode, Cal Herren, Arizona and young Gimble. They went through the pass and out onto the Smith plain and there was no sign of human life, no attempt made to stop them. The rain had stopped and now the sky was a broken mass of scudding clouds, the plain moving with dark shadows that raced against the patches of sunlight. Across the sea of undulating grass that went on forever was the headquarters of the Rafter S, hidden from their sight beyond the dip of the horizon. In a swale so broad that it was impossible to distinguish it except from a distance, over a thousand cattle grazed along the small river that looped across the plain and split itself in the breaks before joining the Canadian.

The Rafter S had been in the process of a round-up for weeks and this was a part of the herd that had been brought in. They were staying here of their own accord, satisfied for a day or so with the new grazing ground. Later the Rafter S

crew would start moving them to join with other bunches of equal size and a herd of five thousand or more would be ready for the trail. Cal waited until the men were near him and then leaning across his saddle horn he said, "I had five hundred head to start with. We didn't find any dead so I've still got five hundred head. I want my own stock if we can find it, but I haven't got time to waste. The main thing is, I want five hundred head."

They went to work then and they found a surprising number of Cal's cows, all the run knocked out of them. They had over a hundred head by the time the day was done and they were making them up into a night herd when they saw Darcy Clayton, Reno Blair and four other Rafter S riders sloping in toward them. Cal loosened his gun in his holster and he said to Arizona, "You let me handle it." He saw the anticipation in the drifter's eyes, the uncertainty on the face of young Gimble.

Clayton was ready for trouble now. He swung down and stood there, his feet spread, his intentions in his eyes. He said, "You're on Rafter S range, Herren."

"I'm staying here until I get my cows," Cal said.

ARIZONA had dismounted and was standing a little back of Cal. The two guns seemed heavy and ready on his hips. His arms were folded but the Rafter S men watched him and did not make a move for their own weapons. Reno Blair got out of the saddle and his heavy movements were deceiving. "You're rustling, Herren," Clayton said.

Cal Herren shook his head. "I'm cutting your herd for strays."

It could only stall so long; every man knew it. Rafter S had the advantage of numbers but these three could do some damage before they were whipped. There was that acute reluctance to start it, the certain knowledge that it must come. They

heard the rider then and Cal risked a glance from the corner of his eye. It was Vyda Smith.

She slid her horse to a stop and threw herself from the saddle. There was a sharp bite of command in her voice and she spoke directly to Darcy Clayton. "I'll handle this." She turned and her eyes met Cal's eyes and there was something there he could not read. Immediately the look was gone and there was one of unnatural hardness in its place. He got the feeling that when she was around him she forced herself into a temper. It was as if he were a red flag to her anger. She said, "What have you got to say for yourself, Herren?"

"I'm making up my herd," he said.

"You're poor at reading brands," She nodded toward the gather. Some of the cows were Rafter S. "Most cocklebur outfits are." She had a way of slapping him in the face with her statements.

"Maybe it would have been cheaper for you to have left my cows alone in the first place," he said.

She was a striking woman, tall for a girl. She had a well chiseled face that avoided any semblance of sharpness. Her eyelashes were heavy and dark, her mouth full, her chin determined and clefted. Her nose seemed at once too large and at the same time in keeping with the bony structure of her face. The play of cloud shadows did tricks and Cal realized suddenly that hers was a face made up of strong individual features which were completely beautiful in the aggregate. It was as if an artist had painted a masterpiece by emphasizing bold brush strokes. The girl became aware of his gaze and a fleeting woman expression touched her lips and her eyes and then was gone.

She spoke with a well modulated, husky voice. She said, "Get off my range, Herren."

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He shook his head. "You'll have to put me off."

Her men took it as the signal they had waited for. Cal saw Darcy Clayton's movement, saw his hand stop half to his holster. Cal had gripped his own gun but there was no need to draw it. He saw Reno Blair shift his bulky weight. Blair's eyes widened and his hands lifted shoulder high. The girl did not move but the color drained from her face. Cal shifted his gaze to Arizona. The drifter was standing there, a cocked six-shooter in each hand. That fixed smile was on Arizona's face. He said, "You'll have to be faster than that, Clayton."

The girl did not look at Cal. She was looking straight at Arizona, too intently Cal thought. She said, "I didn't know you could afford to hire gunmen, Herren."

"Did you think you had a corner on the market?" he asked. He was thinking of the incredible speed with which Arizona had drawn his guns. He knew, too, that it had been done as a show for the girl as much as it had been done from necessity. Gimble had his gun out now, covering the Rafter S men. There was no backing down. Cal drew his own weapon and somehow felt foolish.

Arizona was smiling at the girl, an open smile that did not try to hide its meaning. He said, "I'm sorry to draw a gun on a girl as pretty as you, miss."

"You're very gallant, I'm sure," she said, but she smiled back at him nevertheless and it was the first time Cal had seen her smile. There was a strange easiness between these two and it bothered Cal. The girl said, "With guns that fast you're working for the wrong outfit. The brand you ride for is about to go out of business."

"I'm always ready to listen to an offer," Arizona said. "Maybe we can get together and talk about it sometime?"

"Perhaps we can," she said.

She turned toward Cal then. She had

placed her hands on her hips and she seemed to be consciously imitating the stance of a man. "I've let you stay here now longer than any two bit mavericker has stayed before," she said. "I did it because somehow I felt sorry for you. You were so pitifully small and you tried so pitifully hard." She was choosing her words, cutting his pride in every way she could. "Be out of the country by tomorrow morning."

He looked at her and because she had hurt him he wanted to hurt her. He said, "If you're making a threat, be ready to back it up."

He saw the quick flood of color, the tight set of her mouth, and then she turned away, not as a man turns, but with a quick, flouncing movement that lacked only the swirl of a full skirt. She stepped into her saddle and motioned her men to follow. Cal, Arizona and Gimble kept them covered with their guns.

She turned back then, just for a second, and she smiled at Arizona. It was a tempting, provocative smile. She said, "Be careful with those fast guns, stranger. You're much too handsome to get yourself shot." Cal saw Arizona grinning back and he was suddenly mad.

She turned her horse and rode, Clayton and Blair and her riders behind her. Cal heard the sound of Arizona's guns dropping into their holsters and when he looked at the drifter the smile was still on Arizona's face. Later, Arizona started to whistle a small tune. Cal Herren felt an unexplainable annoyance. He unsaddled his horse and kicked the gear into a jumbled pile.

CHAPTER

2

Burning Hatred

Young Gimble was feeling cocky. He had met a gun crew and helped back them down and it had gone easier than he had ever imagined it could go. He walked

with a swagger this morning and there was a sureness about him that hadn't been there before. Cal saw it and worried about it but there was nothing he could do.

Cal had worked out a plan in the night and now they moved the skeleton herd before it was full dawn. Arizona worked as if the cows were his own but he had an insolent way of sitting in his saddle that said he was no man's property. He would change with the wind if the notion struck him.

They had pushed the small herd a mile when they saw the shape of their trouble. In the pass that led from the flats out through the rimrock a dozen riders were waiting. They sat there patiently, no guns in sight, their cigarettes trailing blue smoke. Cal appraised the width of the pass and calculated his chances of pushing the herd through. He circled back then to where Gimble was riding drag. The kid had spotted the riders and the anticipation of trouble was on his face. Cal said, "Just keep pushing 'em along until I give the signal." The kid nodded and his eyes said he hoped they would start something.

Cal rode around the herd, picking up a stray here and there, holding the small band of cattle in a tight herd, and he dropped his horse in alongside Arizona. Arizona looked at Cal and grinned. "How much of her talk is bluff?" he asked.

"A lot of hers," Cal said. "None of Darcy Clayton's."

"Who runs the outfit?"

"She does," Cal said.

Arizona squinted his eyes and pursed his lips. "It's a big outfit," he said. "It might be fun working for her."

Again Cal felt that touch of annoyance. Arizona had a free and easy way about him; the way of a man who just doesn't give a damn about anything. Cal said, "Our job is to get these cows through that pass. Check the bet to her and see what happens."

"Sure, boss," Arizona said, and in the way he said it Cal knew the drifter was laughing at him.

They kept pushing steadily on, straight into the pass, and the Rafter S riders held their ground. When the point of the herd was within a quarter of a mile of the first rider, Vyda Smith came out alone to meet the herd. She was tall and straight in her saddle. She rode a clean limbed palomino and she was magnificently sure of herself. She reined up and waited and Cal rode forward to meet her. There was no preliminary between them. She said, "Your gun boy was too fast for us last night. This time it's our show. If you try to put your cows through that pass I'll stampede them back so fast you'll never know what hit them."

"You're good at stampedes," Cal said. "Go ahead and try it." He wheeled his horse and left her there alone. When he was within hailing distance he stood in his stirrups and waved his hand. Gimble and Arizona dropped back and in a matter of seconds there was confusion at the rear of the small herd. The excitement spread and the lead steers broke into an ambling run. Vyda held her ground until the first steer was within four feet of her and then she jerked her horse aside and the herd broke into a full run.

By his movement, Cal had cut her off from her men. Now she was off to one side with part of the herd between herself and her crew. The ground was still wet and there was no dust. Back there Gimble and Arizona were waving their hats, cutting from side to side. The herd picked up speed and the feel of panic was on them. Cal could see the faces of the Rafter S riders. They were drawn and tense; some were unsure. He looked for Darcy Clayton and Reno Blair and didn't find them. He cut back then to join Gimble and Arizona. "Get in behind 'em and give 'em hell," he ordered. "Get 'em into a full run and head 'em straight

into the pass. We get 'em running fast enough they'll go through!"

The cattle moved, a lumbering, confused mass at first, then a charging herd with the makings of a stampede about them. The Rafter S riders yelled and waved their hats. The cattle turned, the entire herd started zig zagging. Cal and his men were ready for it; they had planned it well. They swung the point and the herd headed into the pass. Cal felt the swift thrill of success and then from somewhere, to one side, there was the crack of a rifle.

At first he thought the Rafter S men were trying to turn the herd with guns. Everything seemed to stop. And then he looked back and saw young Gimble standing in his stirrups. The kid had half drawn his gun. He was trying to hang on. He saw the terrified surprise on the kid's face and then Gimble pitched out of his saddle and his horse ran on without him.

That was the beginning. Arizona left his spot and dropped back and Cal saw him jerking a six-shooter from its holster. The cattle turned, in full stampede now, and it was Cal who had to give ground. Somewhere in the rocks the rifle cracked again and Arizona wheeled his horse and made a quick run for cover. The cattle were hopelessly lost. They had turned and were headed back down the slope in the direction from which they had come. Cal found himself alone and exposed there in the pass and then he saw Vyda Smith racing toward him.

She was standing in her stirrups, leaning forward, and she was shouting something. When she was near enough he realized she was trying to silence that rifle. He reined across in front of her and grabbed the cheek strap of her bridle. For a moment the two horses struggled against each other and his leg was pressed hard against hers, their faces were close. He saw the white strain of worry on her face, the wide anger in her eyes. "Let me

go, you fool!" she said. She lashed out at him with her quirt. "They've lost their heads! Do you want to get yourself killed?"

He saw that for this fleeting moment she was actually on his side and he felt a savage tug of emotion he had never felt before. He released the cheek strap and she spurred her horse into a full run. The rifle cracked again and Cal felt his horse go out from under him. He ran then, flinging himself behind the nearest cover of boulders. The rifleman was high in the pass, well hidden. Cal spotted him finally, out of six-shooter range. He drew his gun and fired twice and he knew that the shots were wasted.

He saw Gimble's body out there and knew that the kid was dead. Behind him and to the right Arizona was holed up in a rock pile. He turned his attention to Vyda Smith who was now up in the pass with her men. He could tell even from here that she was arguing violently. Half of the Rafter S men reined their horses and went with her and were soon out of sight; the others held their place in the pass and now there were guns in their hands. There was some kind of hurried consultation going on between them. There was a definite split in the crew.

He saw Darcy Clayton and Reno Blair for the first time. Blair was on foot, Clayton riding back and forth through the riders who had remained in the pass, giving orders. The entire band hit for cover and almost immediately a dozen guns cut loose and started spraying the lower slope with lead.

THE hopelessness of the situation stabbed through Cal and he knew he could accomplish nothing by staying here until one of the stray shots got him. He looked for Arizona and saw that the drifter was keeping out of it. He thought of how Vyda had tried to stop it and he knew that she was his only chance now. He called

out for them to hold their fire then he took a deep breath and stood up, his gun holstered now, his hands high above his head. He saw Arizona come out of cover, that same grin on his face.

Cal started walking up the pass then, his hands still over his head. A dozen men came out of the rocks and most of them held guns. Darcy Clayton and Reno Blair were there and Reno had a rifle in his hand. He was grinning broadly as he levered a shell into the rifle.

"Now you're being smart, Herren," Darcy Clayton said.

"I'll talk to Vyda, not you," Cal said.

"From here on you'll talk to me," Clayton said.

He saw her then, riding through the pass with the six riders who had stayed with her. She slid her horse to a stop and threw herself from the saddle. He had never seen such complete rage in any woman's eyes. She walked straight to Darcy Clayton and stood there. Cal expected her voice to be high pitched, hysterical. The very softness of it startled him. "You're fired, Clayton," she said. "You understand?"

"It's a little late for that, Vyda," Clayton said. There was a sneer in his voice. "I offered you a good proposition last night and you turned it down. I reckon I'll have to run things my way from here on in." His voice became insinuatingly soft. "Unless you've changed your mind." He reached out and put his hand on her arm. She slapped him hard across the face.

He reached out quickly and gripped her wrists. She struggled fiercely, but she was no match for him. In trying to hold her he jerked her off balance. She fell hard and Cal Herren took two steps forward. All his strength was behind his fist when it cracked against the side of Darcy Clayton's head.

Clayton fell clumsily, but he didn't stay down. He got up slowly, a trickle of blood running from one corner of his mouth.

Two men had stepped forward and grabbed Cal's arms. They held him there, straining against their grip, unable to move. Clayton wiped his mouth and scraped the mud from his clothing as best he could. He took his time about it.

Vyda Smith was standing back, her face colorless, her lips set. Clayton looked at her and he said, "You made a mistake when you slapped my face, Vyda. You could have had Rafter S, bigger than it ever was, and you could have had me along with it. Now you can get along with nothing, just like this mavericker here. You been sticking up for him; see how you like him when I get through with him." Reno Blair had been standing back to one side, his mouth twisted in a leer, his eyes on Vyda Smith. Clayton said, "Go ahead, Reno."

Blair put down his rifle. He walked over in front of Cal and he stood there a minute, shifting his feet, getting himself set. He doubled up his fist and blew across his knuckles. Cal saw the blow coming and was powerless to do anything about it except duck his head. Blair's fist hit him high on the temple and he felt as if he had been slugged in the head with a sledgehammer.

The blows kept coming—he didn't know for how long. He felt himself sinking. His legs went out from under him. The two men who held him jerked him upright again. From time to time he thought he heard the girl screaming, "Stop it! You're killing him!" He couldn't be sure he heard her. Maybe it was only what he wanted her to say.

There was an explosion. He felt it, rather than heard it, just as a man feels the concussion of a blast. Reno's fist hit him again. His head snapped back. He knew that the two men who had been holding him had released him now. He fell, wanting to fight, unable to raise his arms. He could see a blur of movement but his eyes wouldn't focus correctly. He thought

Arizona was standing there, his two guns in his hands, but he couldn't be sure of that either.

The darkness closed in again and something hit him. It was harder than Reno's fist, more concentrated, more of a shock behind it. The world was black and great balls of light came bounding toward him and when he tried to push them aside they bounced out of reach. He struck out at them but his legs were lead and he couldn't move except with a great, floating slowness. He was hot, horribly hot, and he wanted water. He tried to speak and found that his lips were glued tight.

He knew he was struggling, fighting, and once, for a swift second, he was conscious and the light seared his eyes. Then it was dark again and the torture of feverish dreams was there. He reached up finally and touched his face and found it gaunt and covered with a heavy stubble of beard. He looked at his hands and saw that they were on a quilt. Everything was dark but finally it cleared and he saw the roof beams of a cabin over his head and he knew he was conscious.

His lips were cracked from fever. He moved and a pain reached from the pit of his stomach to his right shoulder blade. He moaned, and it was the first sound he had heard. He didn't know where he was but it didn't seem to matter. He turned his head and closed his eyes and in a little while he was asleep. And this time the devil dreams did not come to haunt him.

IT WAS three more days before Cal Herren realized completely that he was in his own cabin, and with that realization came the certain knowledge that he was not here alone. There were perhaps a half dozen men here with him—men he did not know by name, but men he recognized gradually as Rafter S riders. And then on the evening of that day he saw Arizona.

The drifter came into the room, smoking a cigarette. He hooked a chair out from the wall and straddled it and he spoke as if no time had passed. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"I guess so," Cal said. "Are you still working for me?"

Arizona shook his head. "I'm working for Vyda Smith."

"You mind telling me what happened?" Cal asked. "Or is that against your principles?"

Arizona blew the ash from his cigarette. "Somebody pulled a gun and I killed him. All hell broke loose and you caught a slug in the belly. I thought you were buzzard bait and it was all right with me. I thought I had things figured out, but the gal upset it."

"What about the girl?"

"She got us to pack you up here and she's been nursing you along for two weeks. It's beginning to look like I'm working for the wrong outfit again."

Cal was getting tired. He said, "You mean Clayton and Blair?"

"Why not?" Arizona said. "They've taken over Rafter S—kicked her off her own range. She hasn't got any more than you've got. I've made her a deal but she hasn't made up her mind yet."

"Where is she now?"

"Out there cooking you up some grub, I guess," Arizona said.

Cal didn't want to talk to Arizona any more; he wanted to talk to her. He turned his face toward the wall and he couldn't control the sleep that came quickly. When he awakened it was morning and Vyda Smith was smoothing his pillow. She stepped back quickly when he opened his eyes and started to leave the room. He stopped her by calling her name.

She didn't look at him and her voice sounded strange when she said, "You'll be able to ride in another week. As soon as you are, start riding and keep going."

"You could have left me out there and

saved yourself the trouble of telling me that," he reminded her.

"I wouldn't have done that to a dog," she said flatly. "It doesn't mean I've changed my mind about you."

"Then we're even," he said. "I've still got five hundred cows."

"And no crew."

"Then I'll drive 'em alone," he said.

She left the room, slamming the door behind her, and he grinned at the sunlight that was filtering through the window. Some of the starch had gone out of her. He wasn't the only one who had his back against the wall. And somehow he felt that the wound of defeat was more serious with her than it was with him. She had a remnant of loyal Rafter S riders still on her side and she had hired Arizona, a professional gunman. That in itself proved she was getting desperate.

During the next few days he was completely alone during the daylight hours. He knew that Vyda and Arizona were making preliminary plans to take back the Rafter S herd and it worried him. Once before he had seen her go just so far and then back down. He had watched Darcy Clayton and Reno Blair, too. Watched them for three years, never once able to turn his back. She couldn't bluff them, he knew, any more than she had been able to bluff him, but they wouldn't be as easy on her as he had been. And he still didn't know whether or not he could trust Arizona. The man promised nothing.

When Vyda walked into his room the next day, he felt her extreme agitation, even while she tried to retain her pose of supreme confidence. She wanted to talk to him he knew, but she had never trained herself to ask for help. He looked at her and the thin evening light in the room softened her features and made her more effeminate than he had ever remembered seeing her. He said softly, "Why don't we try forgetting we hate each other, just for a minute?"

There was a quick glisten of tears in her eyes and she tried hard to hide it. He reached out and touched her hand and suddenly all the pose was gone. She gripped his hand fiercely, as if she needed what additional strength he could give her. "It's Arizona," she said.

He felt a quick twist of fear in his middle. "What about him?"

"He's been seeing Clayton and Blair. I caught him at it today. I had planned to round up what cattle I could with the crew I have and sneak them through the pass the first night I could make it. My boys have been spotting the herd, figuring out how best to do it. Arizona has been helping. I thought I could trust him."

"Arizona works for pay," Cal said. "He sold out to you as soon as he figured I was busted, didn't he? He'll give you the same treatment. He hasn't any sense of right or wrong. All he has is a gun."

She no longer tried to hide the tears. "Does it always have to come to guns?" she demanded. "My father held this land because he felt it was his right to hold it. He never killed anyone. He never had to. He said if a man didn't have what it took to hang onto what was his own he had no right to stay here. He made that plain to maverickers and they left of their own accord and he said the country was better off without them. This is still Smith range. It always has been and it always will be. I promised my father that."

"But suppose somebody came along who had what it took to stay?" he asked. "What then?"

The utter confusion was ruling her now. She was living with a promise she had made to a dying man, not knowing how to keep that promise. "Let one mavericker stay and there'll soon be a dozen," she said. It was a rehearsed speech with no meaning behind it.

"Your dad and I would have worked something out," he told her. "Either that or one of us would have died."

She looked at him then, her eyes angry, filled with tears, her face twisted with emotion. She had found a scrap of argument to grasp. She was building a woman's anger now, she wanted to hurt him. She said, "Can you prove that that isn't what happened? Can you prove you didn't kill my father?"

He had wondered how long it would be before she used that weapon. He said softly, "If you really thought I killed him you would have called in the law a long time ago. There's law even here when it comes to murder. You've never believed it. You were looking for a club to use against me because you needed an excuse."

She was like a child now, wanting an argument, knowing she had none. She said, "It still goes. Get out of here as soon as you can ride."

He said, "I guess I was wrong, thinking we could forget we hated each other. My cows are still out there and I mean to have them. You can side along with me or against me. It makes no difference."

It did make a difference, he knew, but there had never been any kindness between them. She got up suddenly and left the room and something in the way she looked at him told him that he had hurt her again, perhaps more than ever before. But this time there was no pleasure in it. He hadn't wanted to hurt her. He called to her, wanting to reopen the conversation, thinking he would thank her for taking care of him. She did not turn back.

He dressed and went to the closet and got the gun and dropped it into the holster. He could tell by the sounds that the house was empty. The Rafter S men had made a camp out beyond the corral and Vyda spent much of her time with them. He heard a soft step in the living room and he thought she was coming back. He felt a quick surge of hope. The door of the bedroom opened and Arizona slipped into the room, as silent as a night

shadow. He said, "Don't reach for that gun, Cal. You're not that fast."

CHAPTER

3

Arizona Calls the Play

The drifter looked tired, like a man who has ridden a long way. He also looked like a man who has made up his mind. He let his hand slide away from his gun belt and he said, "I never knew how to take you, Cal."

"That makes us even," Cal Herren said.

Arizona laughed. "I don't hide my moves," he said. "I thought when I first met you that you were going to make a go of things. I was going to string along until you got your cows on the trail and then I was going to take them away from you."

"You think you could have?"

"I think so," Arizona said. "I've got a couple of good boys staked out. I could have counted on young Gimble."

"Then you decided after I got plugged that you could do better siding with Vyda, that it?"

"That's it," Arizona said. "But I never worked with a woman before." He grinned. "She's a likeable cuss, for all her meanness. But she hasn't got what it takes to put it across alone."

"So now you've put in with Clayton and Blair."

"That depends," Arizona said. "I'm still open to a good proposition."

Arizona had gone over to the chair and he was sitting there, straddling it, his chin leaning on the chair back. There was a certain handsomeness about him but his eyes were slate hard and the lines made his mouth harsh and cruel. Cal had seen many a man holding a winning hand at poker. Arizona was like that. Cal said, "What's your deal?"

"Half the combined herd when you get to Dodge."

"Suppose I tell you to go to hell?"

Arizona shrugged. "Go ahead. Clayton has offered me a deal—not as good as that, but good enough."

"These friends of yours—they'll use their guns the way you tell them, is that it?"

"That's the general idea," Arizona said.

"You're a nice guy, Arizona."

"I make a living," Arizona said. "That's more than you'll do if you sit here and let Clayton and Blair pick you off like a sitting duck."

"You figure they'll try that?"

"I don't figure in a deal like this," Arizona said. "I know. I've got my boys within a mile of here. They'll come on over, if I give the word. Or they'll go the other way. You've got trouble coming in the morning—big trouble. I'm going to be on one side or the other, because that's my business. It's up to you."

Arizona was too bluffing. He was too straightforward about it. Cal had no idea of where the man had come from or where he was going, but he knew a professional gunman when he saw one. He thought of Vyda and of her few loyal men. He had had a chance to observe them and he knew that they were the weak side of her crew when it came to fighting. Clayton had been able to hang onto the fighting men. Three of her men were old—past sixty. The other three were inexperienced hands who were sticking because they felt it was their duty to stick by a woman. None of

them would amount to much in a real showdown and that was a bet Darcy Clayton hadn't overlooked. As for himself, he could still shoot a gun but he wouldn't be much good in a fight. He just didn't have the stamina for it yet. Darcy Clayton had figured that, too.

"I've got five hundred head at stake," Cal said slowly. "She's got five thousand. Why tell me?"

"Because if I read the sign right, the two of you will fight it out together," Arizona said.

"Then you read it wrong," Cal said. "We're going our own way."

"In that case, I'm barking up the wrong stump again," Arizona said. He got up and now his hands were back at the gun belt again. "Been nice knowing you, Herren."

He turned toward the door, walking with a sidewise stance, his eyes on Cal. The voice from the doorway said, "Wait a minute." It was the girl. She was standing there and there was no way of telling how much she had heard. She removed the doubt when she said, "Five thousand is a big herd, Arizona. Maybe you had better make me the same proposition."

The expression never changed on Arizona's face. He said, "I tried dealing with you once."

"You didn't give me a chance to make up my mind," she said.

"I'm waiting."

*Wolf Shows
He is
Smart as a Fox*



SEATTLE, Wash.—Robert Wolf, service station owner here, has switched to Calvert Reserve. "It's the smart switch for any man," he says. "Calvert's lighter, smoother, a better buy."

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"I'll give you half the herd less five hundred cows," she said. "You know where to get the other five hundred."

The color drained from Cal Herren's face. She was deliberately signing his death warrant and she must have known it. He looked at her, trying to make himself see something in her he could hate and he was unable to find it. He felt suddenly weak and sick and the full realization of his emotion hit him. He was in love with her and he had been for a long time. He had been able to hide it as long as there was not a complete break between them but now she had left no open door. It was over and there was nothing to do but admit his love and at the same time admit that it was hopeless. He looked at her and his voice was toneless. "You'll have to take them away from me first Arizona."

The grin came back to Arizona's face but his eyes remained cold and hard. "It's the kind of a deal I like," he said.

Cal waited for her to break, but she didn't. Her chin tilted and she ignored Cal completely. "Go get your men," she said to the gunman.

Arizona left, moving easily, with confidence, and they both knew he would be back with his killers. She stood there in the doorway, completely shaken now, and he thought he saw her sway and grip the door-jamb for support. He said, "Why did you do it?"

"Because I hate you," she said. "Because you've stuck it out and made a go of it in spite of what I could do to stop you. Because there's no other way to get rid of you."

SHE stood there waiting for him to strike back at her, the flare of anger set up crimson against her cheeks. She was waiting for something that would hurt her, something that would vindicate the move she had made. He couldn't say it. He said, "All right, Vyda." She turned

quickly and left the room and he knew she was crying and he didn't know why.

He spent a miserable night without sleep and about midnight he heard the riders approaching the house. There was a challenge from the Rafter S men, the bark of a dog, and then silence. He got up and dressed and put on his gun. Outside he found Arizona and two other men having coffee at the fire. Arizona didn't bother to introduce his two riders; he didn't need to. Cal saw with a glance that they were men who knew their business; men, who under the leadership of Arizona, made a business of seeking out trouble and making money from it. They drank their coffee silently, hard faced men who sat with their backs to the fire, their eyes bleak and alert. He didn't see Vyda and he was just as glad. Arizona tossed out the dregs of his cup and said, "You're a fool, Herren."

"We'll see," Cal said.

After that he saw Arizona had taken over. Vyda must have given the word to her men that Arizona was to fight with them. The drifter went about his work methodically, with no show of emotion. He spotted two men in the barn, two more in the tool shed. "The girl will stay in the house," he said, then seeing Cal he added, "I'm not giving orders to you."

"I'll take the house," Cal said. "I've got ammunition there. The girl rides and gets out of it completely."

"You tell her then," Arizona said. He walked away, still insolent, still sure of himself. His two men remained at the fire, silent, morose, paid fighting men with a job to do. Cal waited until the silence was oppressive, feeling left out of things, cursing his weakness. He asked one of the Rafter S riders where Vyda was and the man nodded toward the lean-to off the kitchen. Cal went there and rapped on the outside door.

She answered immediately and he knew she hadn't been sleeping. "It's Cal," he

said heavily. "You better get out of here. There's a little canyon down past the coral—"

There was a rustle of sound inside the small room, the noise of the wooden bar latch being slid aside and then the door opened and she stood there, fully clothed. The thin light of pre-dawn was on her face and in her hair and it was enough to show the worry in her eyes. There was no anger; there was only fear.

They stood close together, these two who had fought so long, and they seemed to realize suddenly that the fight had not been one against the other but each with his own self. She had promised to keep Rafter S intact and he had made her break that promise. She had stood in his way but instead of pushing her aside he had fallen in love with her and now he was fighting himself because of it. He thought of all the old temper between them and he found none of it. He spoke her name.

There was no defense if there was no assault; her words rushed out, words that had been held back too long. "You fool! You crazy fool! Can't you see that I was only trying to save you?" Her voice was vibrant and low, the way it had been the day she tried to fire Clayton. "I thought if I showed you that no one would back you up you'd get out of it. You're sick. You're not able to stay here and fight. Get out of it while you can. I'll give you your five hundred cows if it means that much, only get out of here!" Her voice was rising now and she could no longer control it. "Get out of here, do you hear? Get out of my life!"

He knew clearly now why she had fought him and he knew why he was a red flag to her anger. She had fallen in love with him, just as surely as he had fallen in love with her. There was no thought behind what he did. He took her in his arms and kissed her. At first she struggled, surprised, angry, and then the anger was gone and she surrendered into

his embrace and clung to him and her lips were warm against his. She broke away from him and he heard her whisper his name and then she said, "Go away. Please go away. Please leave me alone."

And he knew that he hadn't won her and perhaps he never would. Her duty was to Rafter S—the Smith outfit—and with her perhaps love would always be secondary, an intruder encroaching on her duty. It was a thing to fight and run out, just as her father had run the maverickers from the breaks. He tried to think of a suitable answer, a soft answer. They heard Arizona's voice, sharp, commanding. "Here they come, boys. Get set!"

Darcy Clayton and his men rode with an obvious confidence. They had planned this well, over a long period of time, and they knew just what men they were up against. Cal saw them coming through the thin light of the morning and for a moment there was a panic in him as he realized his own weakness and then his thoughts were of the girl and the panic was gone. He hurried her inside the house and took his own place at the front window. He heard her say, "There's still time to stop it, Cal," and he smiled at her.

Arizona was standing near the corner of the barn, making no move to put himself under cover. Darcy Clayton and Reno Blair rode ahead of the others, Clayton relaxed and sure, Blair with a rifle across his pommel. They rode directly up to Arizona and Cal could see them there but he could not hear what was said. The tension of the long moment mounted and then the voices rose and carried to the house. He heard Clayton's curse, saw Arizona draw his gun. There was a flash of flame, a wheeling of horses and Arizona ducked for the barn. The girl was standing at Cal's elbow. She said, "He didn't double-cross us!"

He turned to order her out of the room but it was too late. Clayton's crew had dropped back into the grove of cotton-

woods just beyond the corral. A rifle cracked, an afterbeat to the shattering of glass in the front window. Cal Herren picked a target and fired.

It was full scale now, a thunderous roar of guns, the first volley as men's nerves snapped. Out in the tool shed Arizona's two men displayed the training of their calling. They took their time, choosing their targets, and a man came out of the cottonwoods, walking with a lumbering gait until he fell in full view of the house. Cal heard Vyda's quick sob, nothing more, and she handed him a loaded gun.

ONE of her riders tried to better his position. He had been stationed in the barn but now he came out the door on a full run, headed for the tool shed. Cal saw Arizona try to stop the man; he saw a gunman in the cottonwoods step out for a better shot. Cal snapped a shot with his six-shooter, trying to break it up. He was too late. The gun in the cottonwoods cracked; the old man spun around in his tracks, tried to make it back to the barn. He fell and crawled on hands and knees. Another shot jerked at his clothing and he sprawled on his face and was still.

It settled down then, a long drawn out seige with no ending and the sun came up and spread an orange glow over the breaks. From time to time there would be a quick exchange of shots, harmless in themselves, devastating in what they did to a man's nerves. Cal felt the perspiration thick against his back and his legs were trembling with weakness. There was a horrible frustration in him brought on by his certain knowledge that he would have to stay here and watch it, unable to take an active part. There was water out there in the cottonwoods; Clayton could hold out for a long time. A man moved and Cal snapped a shot. The sudden volley from the barn told him of the raw nerves there. And then the tempo of things changed.

A rider broke out of the cottonwoods.

He rode a crazy zig-zagging course, in full sight. The guns in the barn and in the tool shed sought him out, but the man had a charmed life. He rode out of range and then turned and came back, straight at them. A man in the barn lost his head and ran out, his rifle to his shoulder. He was dropped before he had a chance to pull the trigger. Cal found himself shouting orders. "Keep under cover, you fools! It's a trick!" The men in the barn couldn't hear him.

There was a confused shifting of Clayton's men, a movement that drew all the fire toward the cottonwoods. And then from behind the barn a thin column of smoke lifted in the dead air. Two men had worked their way around behind the old log structure and had set fire to the dry hay that was there. The smoke disappeared, then exploded again, pushed upward by the flame. Cal could see Arizona and the men who were with him kicking at the burning pile. It only scattered it.

The inside of the barn became a raging inferno, driving Arizona and the Rafter S men toward the front wall, searing their skins, scorching their hair. They couldn't hold out more than a few minutes. The guns in the grove had become ominously silent, waiting for the men in the barn to break into the open. They wouldn't have a chance. Not unless someone could draw the fire of Clayton's men.

The girl was standing there, a loaded six-shooter in her hand. Cal snatched it, shifting his own gun to his left hand. She must have read his intentions in his eyes. She threw herself on him, trying to hold him back. He shoved her aside roughly, opened the front door and stepped outside, a gun in each hand. There was a dead silence, except for the crackling of the flame. "Right here, Clayton!" he called, and he started walking forward.

Once away from the house he could see the men in the thin protection of the grove. He started firing, saw them scatter,

saw two men drop. He heard the girl's scream, and he kept walking, straight toward the grove. He heard the crash of the roof of the barn as it fell in and then a dozen guns were firing. A gun sounded close behind him, and he turned and saw Vyda there, a rifle in her hand. She threw it to her shoulder and fired just as he hit her and knocked her down. Dirt spurted at his feet; a bullet fanned by his cheek and ricocheted into an angry whine. A gun exploded so close he could feel the heat of the muzzle blast. He whirled himself around, trying to protect the girl, and he saw Reno Blair riding down on him.

Blair's face was twisted with hatred. There was blood on his shirt and his mouth was stretched tight in a grimace. He fired, almost directly down, and the bullet seared close. Cal fired twice and knew he had missed and then Reno Blair was leaning forward in his saddle, clutching at the horn. The gun slipped from his hand and he lost a stirrup. The horse reared and Reno Blair fell from the saddle. He fell hard and rolled over once. The horse ran straight toward the burning barn and Cal saw Arizona standing there, a smoking gun in his hand. There was that same full grin on Arizona's face but there was something more. Pain, perhaps. Surprise. His knees were bent and he was having trouble keeping on his feet. It was Vyda who screamed the warning. Darcy Clayton, mounted, was bearing

down, directly behind Arizona. Cal Herren fired once and the horse went down.

Arizona had no control of his reflexes. He turned slowly, like a man in a daze, and he looked at Darcy Clayton, there on the ground. Clayton rolled, his gun in his hand, he fired once and Arizona went down. It happened all at once, all the shots blending, as Cal fired both guns. He knew he had killed Darcy Clayton but it all seemed unreal. The strain of his sickness was overpowering and he fought to stay on his feet. Out by the tool shed Vyda's loyal riders and Arizona's men made their last fight and started rounding up what was left of the renegade crew.

Arizona's men packed him into the house. The drifter was not dead, but he was sinking fast. That wide grin never left his face. He looked at Vyda Smith and at Cal Herren and he said, "There I sat with a bob tailed straight and couldn't fill it—"

"You'll be all right," she said. She was trying hard not to cry.

"Sure," the drifter said. "I'll be all right. I got a lot of friends where I'm going—" He motioned his two riders to come near him. They were cruel faced men, saddle lean, emotionless. Arizona said, "The deal's off, see? You leave 'em alone."

One of the men said, "If you say, boss."

Arizona's grin was wider now. "I thought I had a good deal," he said. "It

(Please continue on page 129)

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Young Captain Mason ruled his command with courage and integrity—but his career hung in the balance when he challenged the orders of his superior officer.



IT HAD been a hard year, and they hadn't even begun the job they had set out to do. In 1833 the Captain had brought his company of 7th Infantry down the Arkansas to Fort Smith. They had come from Cantonment Gibson, called the "graveyard of the army," but at Smith they had discovered what hard soldiering could be.

Floods had washed across the flats of Belle Pointe, taking most of their fort with it. Wells were flooded. Stagnant pools stood like festering sores, and mosquitoes came in clouds. A fifth of the



Master Rascom was wild with rage.

company had been buried beneath the ankle-deep slime that year, and the whiskey runners were laughing.

But that had been a year ago.

Two men stood on the brink of a small promontory overlooking the sluggish Arkansas river. The new guardhouse was only a few yards away, a squat building of heavy logs, capped with a watch tower of the same timber. Behind them was their new fort, walled on three sides by log barracks and picketed on the front.

"You did a good job, Angus," Captain Mason said. "It's a good location. A good fort."

He was a gaunt man, this scout and interpreter for the 7th Infantry. His face was weather-cured almost to the color of his buckskin clothing. People said Angus was part Indian himself, but nobody was sure about that.

He said finally, "I reckon it'll do. You've got a six-pounder there in the guardhouse commanding the river. I hope you'll use it."

The Fort meant different things to different people. To the Captain, it was a livable place. He hadn't mentioned it to anybody yet—not even to Ann Summers—but it was also a place where a man could bring his bride.

To Angus, the job of stopping the whiskey smuggling was everything. He spat suddenly down at the river. "Okla-humma!" he said dryly. "That's what the Choctaws call it. The home of the red man." He laughed quickly and without humor. "And now they're being robbed even of this."

Captain Mason knew some of the bitterness that was in his scout. He had seen these people, the Choctaws and the Cherokees and the other civilized nations that had been driven from their homes in the south. Now this territory was all they had. For every barrel of whiskey brought into it, the smugglers took out a fortune in furs.

But to Mason it was only a job. It might get him a promotion if he did it well and pleased Major Summers. That was important. Anything was important to Captain Mason, if it concerned Ann Summers, the Major's niece.

It was the next day that the steam boat, *River Belle*, stood in at the fort landing for inspection. Her master was a big, thick-featured man. Everything about him was oversized except his eyes, which were almost lost, like musket balls buried in soft pine.

"I'm Bernerd Rascom, Captain," the man said as he came into the fort's orderly room. He laughed a laugh as big as the rest of him. "I guess you've heard of me. Been sailin' this river ever since I could paddle a bark canoe."

Mason got up and shook hands with the big man. "The inspection is just routine," he said. "A safeguard against whiskey runners. I'll get my men right on it."

"That won't be necessary, Captain," Rascom assured him loudly. He produced a sheaf of papers from his coat pocket. "Here you are, passports and papers all signed by proper officials. I'll just put my name on one of your certificates and be moving up the river."

Army orders said that a reputable master would be allowed to sign certificates that he had no liquor aboard, but it was up to Mason to decide who was reputable. He said coldly, "Have a chair, Mr. Rascom. There may be a wait."

The big man's face got suddenly dark. He sat down carefully as Mason began to go through his papers. He scanned them quickly, then, suddenly a signature stopped him. He looked up at the big man.

"Your papers are all signed by one man," he said. "Major Summers."

It was the big man's turn to be cold. "I told you they were all signed by proper officials." Then he seemed to have a sudden idea. He grinned widely. "Major

Summers wouldn't be your Commanding Officer, would he?"

Rascom read the answer on Mason's face and laughed. "Well, I guess that settles that. Whatever the Major says is right. Ain't that the way they do it in the Army?" He lifted himself off the chair, grinning.

For a moment Mason considered searching the boat, regardless of orders. But only for a moment. A man doesn't get to be Captain at the age of thirty by countering his superior.

He shoved a certificate across the desk. The big man scratched his name carelessly and chuckled.

"I kind of like you, Captain. I think we might get to be good friends—like me and Major Summers." Mason sat stiffly as Rascom left the orderly room, still chuckling to himself.

THE orderly room was quiet. There was only the measured steps of the sentry outside as Mason waited for his anger to burn itself out. He should have searched every inch of Rascom's boat—just because he talked too loud, if for no other reason. But if the big man was a friend of Major Summers. . . . Just because he didn't like Rascom didn't mean the man was a smuggler. . . .

But a voice from the doorway said what was really in his mind.

"You just made a bad mistake, Captain."

It was Angus, the scout. He came inside and rested his musket against the door. "A real bad mistake."

Mason suddenly had enough. First it was Rascom, and now it was his own scout telling him how to run his command.

But Angus spoke first. "You just let a boatload of liquor go up the river," he said flatly. "Selling whiskey to the Indians was Rascom's business in Arkansas. He hasn't changed." He spit Ras-

com's name out as if it tasted bad in his mouth.

Hot words started up, but Mason checked them. Mason sat stiffly and waited, and after a while the scout went away.

After the *River Belle* had steamed away from the fort landing Mason got another surprise—a surprise he hadn't bargained for, but a pleasant one. A private soldier came into the orderly room, saluted stiffly, and placed a package on Mason's desk.

"Compliments of Bernerd Rascom," the soldier said. "Rascom said the Captain would understand."

Mason stared for a long moment at the package in front of him. His first impulse was to knock it to the floor. But then he smelled it.

It was tobacco. Real Virginia-cured tobacco that he hadn't smelled in. . . . He'd forgotten how long. He ripped the package open and the rich brown stuff spilled on the desk.

Mason was careful where he smoked it. But he did, and as he tasted the tobacco his memory of Rascom grew less harsh. "I think we might get to be good friends," Rascom had said. As Mason enjoyed the only luxury he had had since he had been sent to the frontier, he began to wonder. Maybe they would be friends at that.

In another week they had the fort completed, and Mason put the men to building his own house outside the stockade. That night he wrote a letter to Cantonment Gibson, to be posted on the first boat going up stream. It was a letter he had wanted to write for a long time, and now, at last, he could do it. He was asking Ann Summers to marry him.

The following days dragged slowly as he waited for an answer. All river boats bound upstream were inspected. The name of Captain Mason got to be a hard word among the river boatmen. All bar-

rels were bored and suspicious boxes opened. If whiskey was found, passports and papers were taken from both master and crew.

Almost a month passed before Mason got an answer to his letter. He read it eagerly. Then, dazed, he read it again. Finally his mind grasped the meaning of the words.

... It has been so long, he read. You've been gone for more than a year, and here on the frontier people change, sometimes without knowing it. Men who were good soldiers once ...

At first he was angry. Then his insides were empty. That year at Fort Smith—he had volunteered for that job because there had been a chance of promotion. Everything he had done had been for Ann.

Somehow, he had to see her, and show her that he hadn't changed. It was all made easy by a letter that arrived on a boat the following day. This time the letter was from Major Summers himself. He was coming to the new fort on a tour of inspection, but the important part was in the few lines at the bottom of the page. *I trust that this will be pleasant news for you, Captain: I am bringing my niece with me.*

From that day things at the new fort changed. The men who had been playing the role of carpenters and policemen were suddenly soldiers again. A drill field was cleared outside the stockade. The men were sent rummaging for their almost-forgotten clawhammer jackets. Pipe clay was rubbed into their white crossbelts. Their tall, awkward hats were brushed, and the big brass *chasseur's* horn emblem of the infantry polished and glistening.

Men have changed. Men who were good soldiers once. That's what Ann had said in her letter, but Captain Mason was going to show her that he hadn't changed.

There was only one thing that bothered

Captain Mason now. It was a little thing. A pair of serious eyes that seemed to follow every move he made. Accusing eyes, Mason thought, but there was no way of being sure about that. No one could tell what Angus was thinking.

Then one day Bernerd Rascom's *River Belle* touched in again at the landing, from upstream this time. Outside the orderly room Mason could hear the excitement. He went outside in time to see the fort's picket gates swing open for the visitors.

THERE were three of them there, but Mason saw only one. She was carrying her bonnet in the crook of her arm, and the sun put stars in her copper hair. She walked proudly, almost as a man would walk, between the Major and the master of the *River Belle*.

Mason's lieutenants had escorted the three from the landing, but now that the Captain was coming forward they stood aside.

Mason stopped abruptly a few paces away and saluted. "This is a pleasant surprise, Major. I was expecting you later, on an army boat."

Bernerd Rascom laughed loudly. "Army scows ain't suited for the likes of the Major and his niece. Not as long as the *River Belle* is afloat."

The major smiled faintly. He was a small apple-cheeked man, with more pounds around his middle than Mason remembered. His eyes were blue and weak-looking, almost watery.

"Master Rascom is very kind," he said softly. He paused, as if trying to think of more nice words, but he could only add, "Very kind indeed."

Only then did Mason allow himself to speak to Ann. He said only the words that convention required, but she had only to look in his eyes to see the things that were in him. She looked and she saw, but there was no way of knowing what

she was thinking or how she felt.

Bernerd Rascom left the next day, but not before he had made Mason a present of more tobacco and a pair of beautifully matched clay pipes.

"Beauties, eh?" Rascom said loudly. "Picked them up in St. Louis, and a pretty penny they cost too."

Mason held the pipes clumsily. He wanted to give them back. A present like that could be taken as a bribe to some people. But the Master's next words stopped him.

"Gave the Major a pair just like them almost a year ago. He gets a great comfort out of them. Almost like being in civilization again."

Mason kept the pipes. And the tobacco. He felt eyes watching him as he went to the orderly room to put them away. He didn't have to turn to see whose they were.

That afternoon Mason walked outside the stockade toward the house that had been built for him. He watched the sun grow big and orange in the west, edging the pine trees in copper. Then Ann came outside the cabin and Mason felt good by just seeing her.

"It's beautiful out here," she said.

"It is," Mason said, but he wasn't looking at the sun. For just a moment she was close to him, the way she used to be. Then something happened. She seemed to draw away, although she didn't move.

Mason said, "I haven't had a chance to talk to you alone . . . about your letter." When she said nothing, he went on. "Is . . . it somebody else, one of the officers at Gibson?"

She said, "No . . . it isn't that."

Mason breathed easier. Maybe it was just the strangeness of not seeing each other for so long. Maybe it was the cabin. He said, "I guess it isn't much of a house. But we could make it better."

She looked at him. "I suppose that's

important to women on the frontier," she said. "Good homes that keep them in touch with civilization. My Uncle's house in Gibson is like that. Master Rascom has brought us things from the east that makes it almost as good as the ones in cities."

Mason didn't notice if there had been a queerness in her voice. She had given him a straw and he grasped it. "That's what I mean," he said quickly. "Rascom will bring me things I want. Wait and see. We'll have a place as fine as any on the frontier."

She didn't look at him this time. She stared hard toward the west where a horse and rider topped a small rise and came toward the fort. She seemed eager to change the subject as she turned to Mason.

"Is that one of your men?"

"It's our scout," Mason said. "Angus, he's called."

The scout rode Indian fashion, with only a blanket thrown across the horses back for a saddle. As he came down the slope toward the fort he saw Mason and pulled his pony over in that direction.

"Angus" Mason said as the scout dropped off his mount, "Miss Summers."

The scout bowed low with a gallantry that was sincere. "My honor, Miss Summers."

Ann Summers was fascinated by this gaunt man who had the natural grace of a dancing master. She said, "Do you know these Indians and speak their language?"

"Yes Ma'am." Then to Mason's amazement, the scout went on. "I'm part Indian myself. I was raised in the old Cherokee Nation in Georgia," he said quietly. "A plantation, they called it. We owned land, and slaves, and we were prosperous."

"But now your people have nothing?" Ann finished for him.

The scout stared for a long moment. At

last he said, "No, my people still have something. They have a chance to begin again here in the Territory if . . ."

The scout shrugged. "You can see for yourself, if you want to. There are Cherokee farms less than a half day's ride from the fort." Mason had been against it. But Ann insisted. And her uncle, the Major, was indifferent.

EARLY the next morning the three set out for the West, Ann riding between the two men, using a side saddle that the soldiers at the fort had rigged. They reached the top of a slope, with the fort behind them. Angus pulled his horse up and sat for a moment like a wooden figure, with his musket slanted across his back. Ann rode up beside him and Mason followed.

They looked into a valley that was rich and green. Then Angus turned to them. "There's one of the farms," he said. He pointed and Mason saw the cabin, half dugout and half log. Behind it was a small clearing, as if someone had started breaking the land for planting, but for some reason had suddenly stopped.

"The Cherokees aren't hunters like the Comanches and some of the rest," the scout said. "They like the land. Their fathers, and their fathers' fathers were farmers, and good ones."

It was almost as if Angus had seen the

questions in their minds. They rode closer and saw that the hut was deserted. The broken land was a bleak, dead-looking square of ground where an iron plow lay rusting.

The land was good and the Indians were good farmers—then why was the place deserted? The scout answered obliquely.

"Things that grow in the land have little value to the smugglers. They want furs."

Mason was angry because he had been tricked into coming here. He knew there were smugglers in the territory. Some of them would get through in spite of the Army.

But before he could say anything, the scout turned to him. "It could be worse, though," he said, "if it wasn't for the inspection of boats. You're doing everything you can, aren't you, Captain?"

It was more than a question. The scout was accusing him of not doing everything he could. Of not inspecting Rascom's *River Belle*, the same as he did the others. Ann was looking at him strangely, and he could only say:

"Is this all you wanted to show us?"

The scout gave a shrug. "There are other farms I can show you," he said. "All like this one."

They rode back in a silence that seemed to be pulled tight about them. Not even

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Ann seemed to have anything to say. Mason studied the other two and his anger died. He couldn't blame Angus for trying to protect his people. But in the army you learn to take orders—and that's what Major Summers' signature on Rascom's papers amounted to, orders to let the *River Belle* alone.

He had time to think about a lot of things on that ride back to the fort. He remembered what Ann had said about her Uncle's house at Gibson. The things Rascom had given them had made it good. Mason meant to have a house like that. It would be Ann's house, and no scout or anybody else was going to ruin it for her.

But in the back of his mind there was still a picture of that deserted farm. And an iron plow rusting in rich soil.

The days that followed were good because Ann was there. But, still, she hadn't answered his question in the letter. She seemed to be waiting for something, and even she didn't seem sure of what it was.

The day the *River Belle* touched in again at the landing, Mason watched heavily as his men got the Summers' baggage ready to put on board. He had tried to tell himself that Ann would change her mind at the last minute. But he knew she wouldn't.

He looked at his cabin that he had been proud of, and saw it as it really was. Three small rooms of rough logs, and little else. There wasn't much there to make a girl want to stay.

Then he saw Bernard Rascom come swaggering up from the landing, his big voice already booming. Mason waited stiffly while the Major and Rascom shook hands. Somehow, the fine Virginia tobacco tasted bitter in his mouth. He knocked the pipe hard against the heel of his hand, as if somehow the pipe had been the cause of everything. The shank snapped and the clay bowl dropped at his feet.

As if it had been a signal, the Major and Rascom stared at him. The *River Belle's* master said loudly, "Captain, that's a pity. Pipes like that are hard to come by. And expensive." He laughed suddenly, picked up the broken bowl and bounced it in his hand. "But don't you worry. I'll have another one made just like it, first time I get into St. Louis."

Mason said abruptly, "Never mind."

The master's laughter stopped. He looked carefully at the two officers. The Major's weak eyes took on a watery look, almost a fearful look.

Mason heard his voice saying, "I don't want the pipes, or the tobacco, or any other favors." He listened to what he had said with amazement. He didn't know why the words had come out. Maybe he was angry and wanted to take it out on somebody like Rascom. Or maybe it was because of a picture he still carried in the back of his mind. A farm deserted because of smugglers, and of a plow rusting in good soil. Then he admitted to himself that he would never have a house like the Major's. He wouldn't be able to close his eyes forever to men like Rascom. If that was what Ann wanted. . .

HE TRIED not to think about that. He turned quickly and shouted across the square at a young officer. "Take a detail to the landing, Lieutenant. Make a routine inspection of the *River Belle*."

For a moment the lieutenant stared. Then he grinned and saluted quickly and disappeared down the slope toward the boat.

Rascom exploded. "Call that man back! This is an insult, it's . . ."

"It's routine," Mason said sharply. He turned to walk away, but the Major's voice stopped him.

"Captain, it won't be necessary to have the *River Belle* inspected," he said angrily. "Master Rascom will sign a certificate of release, as always."

Mason hesitated. It was a direct order and there was nothing he could do. Then he heard yells from the direction of the landing and he relaxed. "It's too late, sir. The inspection has already begun."

Mason didn't bother to salute before he turned and ran. If he was wrong. . . if Angus had been wrong. . . The Major shouted after him, "I'll have your commission for this, Mason!"

That's what would happen if they were wrong.

Mason raced across the drill field, toward the narrow neck of land where the guardhouse overlooked the river. The guards grinned as they saluted and hurriedly unlocked the heavy door. Mason went up the pole ladder to the watch tower where he could look down on the landing.

The soldiers were already swarming on the *River Belle's* deck, rolling huge barrels from under canvas tarps and smashing them with axes. Mason could smell the raw, sharp odor of whiskey.

He saw Rascom bull his way on board, shouting orders to the crew to put the craft about. Mason shouted down to his cannoneers manning a brutish little brass six-pounder.

"If she moves away, give her six pounds of iron!"

Then Rascom knew he had lost. He stood wide-legged in silent rage and watched his fortune in whiskey wash over the *River Belle's* decks.

Then Mason felt someone beside him in the tower. He didn't have to turn to know it was Angus.

Mason said nothing, because there was nothing to say. By ruining Rascom, he had ruined his chances of ever getting Ann the kind of things she wanted. The Major wouldn't be putting in a complaint—since the *River Belle* had been carrying whiskey. But there was little consolation in that now.

"You did a good job, Captain," the scout said finally. After a moment he turned quietly and went down the ladder. Mason stayed where he was, alone in the tower.

That was a feeling he would have to get used to. Being alone.

Down below the soldiers had finished their job. An army boat put in at the landing and Major Summers went aboard. He looked like an old man. The ramrod that the army had put in his back was gone. Mason watched, and waited for Ann to go aboard.

Black, heavy smoke rolled from the tall stacks of the steam boat, and her paddle wheels slapped the water lazily as she began to pull away from the landing. Mason stared. Somehow he must have missed Ann as she went aboard. He heard Angus on the ladder again.

A voice said, "Do you always stay up here to see your commanding officers off?" Mason turned quickly. It wasn't Angus, but Ann.

For a moment he could only stare, but questions must have shown in his eyes. Ann said, "I'm not going to Gibson—if you want me to stay." She smiled quickly as she saw his bewilderment. "Don't you see, it's not a fine house that I want? I said once that the frontier could change men. Men who had been used to luxuries the way my uncle was. Sometimes they close their eyes to things, if it will make it easier for them."

She waited a long time before she went on. At last she said, "I had to be sure about my husband. After what you just did I'm sure. . ."

She didn't say any more. Somehow she was in his arms and everything was good. For just an instant Mason glimpsed a figure down at the base of the tower. It was Angus, and there was a strange look on the scout's face that Mason had never seen before. Angus was grinning.



Gilson and Marshal Williams dug a deep trench.

BLACK DEATH

Young Doc Gilson's duty led him into a nest of sidewinders—with his only weapons of defense a death-dealing syringe . . . and a shadow from the past.

SPLASHING across the creek in his buggy, Gilson got his first look at G Bar cattle. A half dozen yearling steers were clustered in the little grassy bottom area bordering the creek.

Gilson got out of the buggy and walked toward them. He was a cotton headed man of thirty, broad shouldered in his business suit. He was frowning now, because two of the steers were down and

By CLARK GRAY

Gilson didn't want to believe any of them were crippled up.

The steers showed no alarm at his approach. Gilson could see tumors now on their thighs, neck, shoulder and rump; he began to feel a little sick. When he was close enough he halted, and the things he had learned through three years of veterinary training began to click off relentlessly in his mind.

Loss of rumination. Lameness. General attitude of dejection. High fever.

White lipped suddenly with the knowledge of what this meant, Gilson approached one of the down steers. After its feeble attempts to rise had exhausted it, he cautiously touched one of the rear quarter swellings. The skin was dry, parchment-like, cool to the touch. Stroking the tumor, Gilson heard the peculiar crackling sound under the skin which signified gas formed by multiplying bacilli.

Gilson got back in the buggy, his jaw hardened in determination. This ride out to his dad's old ranch was turning into a grim chore. Topping the creek bank, Gilson put the horses into a run.

Ten minutes later, Gilson pulled up the buggy at the picket gate and sat an instant examining the stone ranchhouse. The fence that the old man had built was still there, sagging a little now. A stranger watched Gilson from a wicker rocking chair on the shaded front porch.

The stranger was a big man who filled the frame of the chair so completely that the sixgun stuck out between the rocker arm and the seat. Dismounting, Gilson crossed the yard and extended his hand.

"Mr. Brownley? I'm Roy Gilson. Veterinarian in Longhorn."

Thad Brownley did not move. Gilson noted that in spite of the man's size, there was no fat on him. Brownley was a superb specimen of meat and muscle. Brownley said finally:

"Gilson? You ain't old J. B.'s boy, what used to own this ranch?"

"That's right. But I haven't been here for seven years. I'm on the place now strictly on veterinary business. John Higgins, the cattle buyer, wanted me to check your herd before he bought it."

Brownley grunted. "Oh? You checked it?"

"Just a half dozen of 'em, Brownley. Yearling steers. But I found out it wouldn't pay Higgins to buy you out. They've got blackleg."

"Blackleg!" Brownley leaped out of his chair at that. A startled look came into the big man's face, to be replaced instantly by a squint of caution. "You're lying, man!"

Gilson shook his head. "I wish I were. I hate to see this happen to a herd that used to be my old man's. You'd better round up your hands, Brownley. There'll be carcasses to bury. You'll need quicklime to disinfect the ground. I'll ride to town and telegraph for government vaccine."

"You won't," Brownley said.

Brownley drew his sixgun.

The move surprised Gilson so much that for a moment he could only blink. Brownley took a quick backward step, and the muzzle of the sixgun was a round unwinking hole, staring at Gilson's head.

Brownley said, "Get in the house, Gilson. You ain't going nowhere."

Gilson lifted his hands shoulder high, his eyes on Brownley. Brownley's face was screwed into a hard mask, but there was no hate in it. It came to Gilson that Brownley was thinking his way out of something. Brownley gestured with the gun. Gilson walked quietly into the house.

BBROWNLEY prodded him down the hallway toward the room that had once been the old man's bedroom. A man sat in a tilted-back chair before the door, rifle across his knees. The man grunted at sight of Gilson.

"Another one?"

Brownley gritted, "Shut up, Duge. Yeah, here's another one, damn it. Put him with Williams."

The man called Duge unlocked the bedroom door and swung it open. At a nod from Brownley, Gilson entered. The room was dim; Gilson could just make out the heavy iron bars that had been cemented in place across the window. Then his eyes adjusted to the semi-dark and he saw a figure rise off the bed. A lean, gray-headed oldster who was smiling wryly. With a shock Gilson recognized U. S. Deputy Marshal Williams, of Longhorn.

"Hello, Gilson. So Brownley's got you, too?" Williams gripped Gilson's hand. "I'm sorry, son. It's my fault, really."

Gilson sat down on the bed and fumbled for a cigarette, trying to organize his thoughts. There was evidently something here he didn't understand. Something more than blackleg. He said uncertainly, "Marshal, I don't—this has got me buffaloed. Why are we prisoners here?"

"It's not too complicated, son." Marshal Williams ran a hand wearily through his gray hair. "I got an order to pick up Brownley. Seems he's wanted on an old murder charge over in Arkansas. I came out here with the warrant, but I was careless, I guess. His hired hand, Duge, got the drop on me. They locked me up here three days ago. And I forgot to tell anybody in town where I was headed."

Gilson lit his cigarette. "So Brownley's a murderer?" Frowning soberly, Gilson blew out his match and flipped it between the iron bars of the window. "Brownley's trying to sell out to John Higgins, you know. He must be planning to skip the territory."

"Uh-huh," Williams agreed. "Likely he needs money, and that's what's holding him here. What caused him to corral you, son?"

"I'm just beginning to savvy that, Marshal. There's blackleg in Brownley's herd."

Williams said, "Oh-oh!" and stroked

his chin thoughtfully. "Brownley has got to sell to raise the money for a get-away. But he can't sell if it leaked out his herd has blackleg. Hell, son, this blackleg is serious stuff, ain't it?"

"Serious as a thing can be, Marshal. It's an epidemic disease with a mortality rate of close to one hundred percent among young cattle. If it isn't stopped, it can spread and ruin thousands of cattlemen in the territory. We need government vaccine, and we need it bad."

Williams clucked sympathetically. "And being prisoners, we can't get it."

"That's right." Gilson crossed to the window and stood staring through the freshly cemented bars. For some reason, Gilson was thinking now of the old man. What would the old man have done in his shoes? Gilson wondered. Gilson squinted across the sun-soaked prairie, seeing here and there the white outcrop of limestone showing through the grass.

The old man, Gilson reflected, had been like that jagged limestone that ridged this bluestem country. Rough. But as the exposed limestone weathered it shed little particles of life-giving calcium, constantly replenishing the soil with fertility. The old man had been like that, rough and unsightly, but giving something secret and necessary to his own son and to the country. The old man, Gilson thought, would have found a way to get vaccine. If he couldn't find it, he would make a way.

It came to Gilson, then. The memory of what he had read returned so clearly that he could picture in his mind the book and the page on which he'd read it. Gilson stepped on his cigarette and when he spoke, his voice shook with excitement.

"Marshal, I can make vaccine."

AT SUNSET, when the hired hand, Duge, brought in two plates of supper, Gilson asked to speak to Thad Brownley. Brownley entered the bedroom an hour later. Gilson explained carefully,

"Brownley, I am a veterinarian. It is my business to prevent animal disease if I can, and if I can't, to cure it. Since you won't let me telegraph for government blackleg vaccine, I'm asking you to let me make some."

Brownley shook his big head. "Why should I do that? I'll be gone from here in a week."

"Sure. We know. But you want to sell the herd first, don't you? You need money. Brownley, a damned greenhorn could look at those cattle and tell something's wrong with them. The tumors are big as dinner plates."

Brownley considered this. "You can cure 'em? I never know'd the damned critters had blackleg, and that's a fact."

"If you'd vaccinated your calves when you should have," Gilson said, "you'd have prevented this outbreak. No, I can't cure them. There's no cure. But I can save what cattle haven't already contracted the disease. That'll save you a lot of money, Brownley. Not that I care about you; it's the neighboring cattlemen I'm thinking of."

Brownley sneered. "Uppity as your old man, ain't you? All right. Duge will go along to keep an eye on you. Williams can help. But if either of you try to get away, Duge won't have to shoot twice. Just remember that. Duge is handy as hell with a gun, and he ain't particular what he uses for a target."

Gilson put in a sleepless night, tossing against the sharp boned form of Marshal Williams on the narrow bed. Next morning after breakfast, he gathered his equipment and led Williams and the gunman, Duge, to the spot of the creek where he'd discovered the sick cattle.

As he'd expected, the two downed steers had died. Gilson instructed Williams about the first steps in making the vaccine.

"What we're trying to do," he said, "is produce an attenuated spore form of

blackleg. That's all the vaccine is: a minute amount of attenuated, or artificially weakened, virus, which will produce immunity without making the animal actually sick. To get that virus in the spore form, we've got to take diseased muscle tissue from these dead steers and cut it into thin strips and dry it. Make the strips as thin as you can, so they'll dry quickly. This has got to be a hurry-up job, Marshal. But it ought to work."

Marshal Williams nodded grimly. And it was grim, unpleasant work, butchering those dead steers under the watchful eye of the gunman, Duge. But by noon they had the meat from the four hind quarters cut into very thin strips and hung on an improvised rack in the sunlight. Gilson erected a temporary fence around the rack out of closely woven barbed wire to keep dogs and wild animals from getting at the diseased meat.

In the afternoon, Gilson and Williams dug a deep trench and buried the remnants of the carcasses, covering them with quicklime. At sundown, Duge herded them back into the bedroom prison.

After supper, Gilson stood at the barred window, looking at the prairie in the fading light. Near the house, he could see one corner of the corrals, and it came to Gilson now, tired as he was, that he had spent many peaceful evenings sitting around the corrals with the old man.

Gilson said, "I see the sign is gone."

"What sign?" Marshal Williams was stretched out wearily on the bed.

"Used to be a big sign over the corral gate," Gilson explained. "It said, GILSON AND SON RANCH. On the day the old man and I had our scrap, he painted out the AND SON part." Gilson hesitated. "That was the last day I saw him alive."

MARSHAL WILLIAMS eased himself into a more comfortable position on the bed. "Your dad was quite a man,

son. Best cowman in the territory. Stubborn, though."

"I know," Gilson agreed softly. "Marshal, I'll never forgive myself that he and I were enemies when he died. He didn't believe much in book learning, you know. I wanted to be a veterinarian, and he thought it was damn foolishness. That's when I left home." Gilson paused. "It hurts to think he died hating me."

"Maybe he didn't, son," Williams said. "Maybe he was planning to give you half the sale money from the ranch, when he sold out to Brownley. Only he had that heart attack and died before he got the chance. You reckon?"

"Maybe. I wish I had some way of knowing. What ever did happen to that money, Marshal?"

"Danged if I know!" Williams came up on one elbow, suddenly frowning. "I saw the bill of sale, but the money—son, do you suppose—"

"I know what you're thinking, Marshal. And it could be. We know Brownley's a murderer. Maybe he did forge the bill of sale. But I doubt if we could ever prove it."

"Uh-huh. Reckon you're right. One thing, son, Brownley didn't kill your dad. He died of a regular heart attack. But it is kind of funny—your dad selling out just a week before he died."

Gilson said, "Nothing we can do about it tonight, Marshal. We'd better get some sleep. Only—I wish I knew the old man didn't die hating me. That's all . . ."

The thought stayed with Gilson throughout the next two days. Because the next two days were idle, and because Gilson wasn't used to idleness, it preyed on his mind. Until finally it became important to Gilson to find some proof that the old man, though it seemed so to his son, had not hated him.

At the end of two days, the strips of beef had dried hard. There had been no visitors to the ranch. This was not

strange, Gilson decided. Nobody knew Marshal Williams' whereabouts, and as for himself, he was a comparative stranger in Longhorn. Only John Higgins, the cattle buyer, might suspect something had happened, and Thad Brownley was doubtless in touch with Higgins and had made some explanation of his, Gilson's absence. On the third morning Gilson and Marshal Williams gathered up the strips of dried beef.

Gilson performed the next steps himself. He pulverized the strips of beef between two stones, then mixed the powder with water to form a paste. He smeared the paste on a flat cookie sheet in the ranchhouse kitchen, then baked it for the rest of the day in the old wood burning stove.

By evening, the paste had been transformed into a hard crust. Working in the kitchen, under the watchful eyes of Duge and Thad Brownley, Gilson pulverized the crust again, then sifted it carefully. He had a brownish powder which, when mixed with sterile water and filtered, would become vaccine.

Gilson said, "Tomorrow morning, Brownley, round up your herd and corral it. I see you've built a squeeze chute. We'll do the vaccinating in it."

Thad Brownley grunted irritably. "A helluva lot of work. I don't know, Gilson. I just about got a deal made with Higgins."

"What if it falls through?" Gilson said, "You'll have to sell the herd to somebody before you can make your getaway. Take my advice, Brownley. Save yourself a lot of grief and vaccinate."

"Maybe you're right. Now listen, Gilson. Duge is the only hand I got. We'll all be busy out there. But not too busy to watch you and Williams. You know by now that it's a hanging for me if I get took by the law. I don't mind tellin' you, I'd kill you in a minute if you try any tricks."

GILSON had no intention of trying tricks. At least not until he finished vaccinating. But next morning, as he was carefully assembling his hypodermic syringes which he'd carried in the buggy, he noticed Brownley watching the syringes with great respect. It came to Gilson then that Brownley was perhaps not sure whether blackleg could be transmitted to humans. Gilson grinned to himself and stored that knowledge for future use.

The vaccinating was hard work, under the broiling sun. Brownley had about three hundred head to run through the squeeze chute. Each animal had to be choused into the chute, halted and squeezed at the right moment, and Gilson had to use a freshly sterilized needle at each vaccination to prevent spread of the virulent virus. It was shortly before noon that John Higgins arrived.

Thad Brownley, who had more reason to be alert, saw Higgins first. Brownley had been working the big lever of the squeeze chute; now he released the lever and said curtly:

"Gilson. You and Williams get over against the chute and stand there. Company's coming. Keep shut, both of you."

Gilson wiped sweat out of his eyes and stared past Brownley. He saw John Higgins riding a gray mare around the picket fence, toward the corrals. Gilson knew then that this was the break he'd been waiting for. He picked up his two syringes

and joined Williams at the chute. He had time to exchange a quick, significant glance with Williams, then he turned to watch Higgins.

John Higgins was a dumpy bespectacled little man, a cattle buyer by profession. Higgins halted his mare near the corrals and dismounted. Gilson, leaning beside Marshal Williams against the squeeze chute, was aware of a furtive movement behind him, and he half-turned to see Duge, the gunman, getting into the position atop the corral a few feet distant.

John Higgins peered over his spectacles at Brownley.

"Hello, Thad. I got your message saying you'd come down half a dollar in your price. Thought I'd ride out and palaver a little."

Thad Brownley put on the best act he could under the circumstances. Brownley grinned.

"Doc Gilson, here, was just givin' the critters a routine vaccination. Weren't you, Doc? Yeah, Higgins, glad you came out. Come on up to the house and we'll get a drink of something."

"Thanks." Higgins nodded easily. "I will in a minute. What kind of vaccination you giving, Dr. Gilson?"

Gilson hesitated. He was not quite sure what answer he should give. If he told the truth, Higgins might guess there was a blackleg outbreak here. And that, Gilson thought, might mean that Higgins



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would become Brownley's third prisoner. To cover his moment of indecision, Gilson turned to lay his hypodermic syringes on the catwalk which edged the squeeze chute at shoulder height. The catwalk was made of an old two by twelve scantling. As Gilson laid his syringes on the board, he started in surprise.

Letters had been burned into the board with a branding iron, or a hot cinch ring. Gilson read the letters in disbelief.

GILSON AND SON RANCH, the letters read.

For a long moment Gilson paused there, with his hand on the two by twelve. And it was suddenly quite clear what had happened. This board was the old signboard which had hung over the corrals. On the day Gilson had left home, the old man had painted out the AND SON part of the sign. But sometime later the old man had worked over the sign again, replacing the painted out portion, and burning the whole thing in. As if, Gilson thought, the old man had made it permanent this time. As if he had taken back a son he'd lost.

Vaguely, Gilson heard John Higgins saying, "What kind of vaccination, doctor?"

GILSON turned, picking up the syringes, and in Gilson now was a strange relief from the guilt that had dogged him seven years.

Gilson said, "Blackleg, Mr. Higgins. We've got a little blackleg outbreak here."

Gilson heard Duge suck in his breath on the corral behind him. Gilson turned swiftly toward Brownley, knowing exactly now what he was going to do.

"Brownley," Gilson said, "you made a mistake when you tore down that old sign and built it into a catwalk. You should have burned it."

Then Gilson threw the first syringe. He threw it like a dart, straight at Thad Brownley. Brownley shouted in surprise as he saw the syringe coming, but he

moved too slowly. The needle point pierced his shirt and hung there, and as Gilson turned toward Duge he heard Brownley screaming in fear.

Duge had his gun out. Gilson threw the second syringe. It sailed past Duge's head, missing him, but throwing the man off balance. Duge lost his seat on the corral rail and sprawled, scrambling for control. Gilson stepped quickly forward and aimed a cool kick at Duge's shoulder. The kick connected. Duge flipped backwards; his head struck a corral post; Duge went limp.

Thad Brownley's screaming had stopped now. Gilson took a sideways step, picked up Duge's gun from the ground, and when he faced Brownley he saw that Marshal Williams had secured the big man's weapon. Brownley had the hypodermic syringe in both hands. He was staring at it, horror in his eyes.

Gilson said, "Relax, Brownley. Blackleg is sure death to cattle, but humans are immune."

Marshal Williams, who was a good lawman, had his prisoners loaded in a wagon and tied back to back within ten minutes. Gilson explained to John Higgins, who had stood flat-footed during the short fight and who listened now in open-mouthed amazement. Higgins said:

"But about this blackleg. I own several thousand head of cattle in the neighborhood. Doctor, I'd better get you to vaccinate them for me, hadn't I?"

"You had," Gilson said. "And we won't have to wait for a shipment of vaccine either. I've got enough to vaccinate every head in the Osage Nation. I don't mind telling you, Mr. Higgins, a young veterinary doctor such as I am could use the work."

"You'll get plenty of work from me," Higgins volunteered admiringly. "After the way you handled these two criminals—"

(Please continue on page 129)

QUICK-SHOT QUARTET

By

BILL FAULK



Bill leaped for his horse.

***The conscientious sheriff knew
he had to uphold the law—to
the end of owlhoot trail.***



I CAN see them now, a vivid picture branded on my memory of the day they took the big step. I was sheriff then, in a small town in northeast Wyoming, when the West was still a brawling infant. I was lined up against the wall with a few other early risers in the town's only bank, groping for the ceiling we could never reach. There were four unwavering pairs of guns threatening us, grasped in four pairs of steady hands. They wore

bandanas over their faces and sombreros were pulled low over their eyes, but I knew them. I knew them by the way they walked, the way they stood, by their soft drawling voices.

There was Bill. He was the leader, the brains of the quartet. Towheaded, of average build and height, his hands were quicker than snake heads when he struck for his guns. He had smiling green eyes that could turn to ice in an instant.

There was Bob, big and rawboned, with a deep voice that boomed when he spoke. He was the steady one, with grey eyes and tawny hair that curled into little ringlets over his head.

There was Fred. He was the dangerous one, with a fiery temper he ill-controlled. He was big too, with wavy brown hair and deceiving deep brown eyes.

And there was Bud. He was the wild one, with laughing blue eyes that never ceased twinkling. He was tall and slim with straight brown hair. He walked like a cat and he was as quick as one with his guns. And almost as sure.

They were dressed almost alike: black hats, black boots, and big black guns that fitted easily into well-oiled black holsters tied low to their thighs. Bill was giving the orders.

"All right, three and four, get the money and don't miss any."

Bud and Bob went back to the big safe, which was standing open. They were back in an instant, dragging bulging gunny-sacks behind them. Bill motioned toward the door and while they loaded their horses he crouched in the doorway regarding us with steady green eyes.

"Ah wouldn't advise anyone to git in this heah doorway for at least five minutes," he drawled. Then with an "Adios, amigos" he leaped for his horse, swinging aboard on the dead run. They were gone then, in a cloud of thundering dust.

I had a posse on the trail within twenty minutes, but we didn't catch them that

day. Nor the next. On the third day, word came in from Ed Whitehead's ranch thirty miles south, that four of his six famous quarter-blood horses had been stolen. I headed south and borrowing one of the two remaining, I picked up the trail from there.

The trail led west, always west. Then abruptly it swung south. Always I was just one jump behind them. When I rode into a town at night, they would have pulled out just that morning. I was never more than eight hours behind them. Then one night, I rode into a small town in southeast Wyoming and when I pulled into the livery stable to put up my tired horse, I saw their mounts, the four quarter-bloods they had stolen from old Ed Whitehead. When the hostler limped up to care for my horse I asked him, "What did the riders of them four hosses over there look like?"

He looked at me out of cautious eyes. "Dunno, didn't look at 'em very close."

He turned away, leading my horse, and I went on down the dusty street. Pausing in front of the first saloon, I pushed my way on in. There they were. Bud and Fred were playing poker at one of the card tables. Bob was drinking at the bar and Bill, well he was leaning against the back wall, watching the door. He was the first to see me and he straightened up when I walked in. I said, in what I hoped was a steady voice, "Boys, I've come to take you back. Dead or alive." I added.

"Reckon it'll be dead, then," he drawled and there was a gun in either hand. I hadn't guessed he was that fast and I was caught flat-footed, my gun just halfway out. I let it fall back into my holster and raised my hands shoulder high. The other three were beside him in an instant and they backed out the rear door, shoulder to shoulder.

With the help of the town's marshal, who luckily happened to be there, I had

a posse organized and after them in a minute. We trapped them in the livery stable and soon had every man in town surrounding it.

I finally called the town marshal aside and told him, "There's only one way we can git them out of there. Have yuh got any kerosene handy?"

He nodded and under cover of a withering fire kept up by the townsmen, I crept up to the blind side of the old building and started a small blaze. I sprinted back for cover and watched the dry, old board structure become a blazing inferno.

A white rag tied to a stick fluttered in the doorway of the burning barn and as the shooting died down, the hostler limped out. Right behind him, a bunch of stampeding broncs came and behind them, the four young owlhoots galloped, mounted on their stolen quarter-bloods. They didn't stand a chance with that fire lighting up the night.

Fred was cut almost in two by a load of buckshot. Bob was hit by a dozen slugs at once and Bud, trying frantically to control his rearing horse, never knew what hit him. Bill was knocked from the

saddle, but struggled back to his feet and he died in the street, a gun blazing in either hand, killed by a hundred guns. I can see them there, lying together in the dust, almost touching each other.

I worked all that night to dig their graves and I buried them the next morning with the dew still fresh on the grass. And knowing the way they'd wanted it, I buried them in the same grave. I dug it long and deep and I laid them there myself, side by side, a hand of each touching the hand of the one next to him. Each head was laid on his saddle and over the young faces, peaceful in death, I placed their sombreros. And before I shoveled the first bit of dirt over them, I said a little prayer.

I said, I knew they'd want to be together in death as they were in life, shoulder to shoulder, ready to face anything. They weren't bad boys, just a little wild. They wanted excitement and quick money; and the only way to get quick money in those days was to steal. I knew they weren't bad boys, for I knew each and loved him like a son: Bob, Bud, Fred. And Bill? Well, he—he was my son.



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Wes weaved in his saddle like
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GLORY HUNTER

By WALT COBURN

Button-To-Buckaroo Novelette

CHAPTER

1

Snowbound Partners

He showed up one bleak late afternoon in February at the snowbound line camp at the mouth of Rock Creek which empties into the Missouri River. He was coming up the river from the direction of Rocky Point. He had to come by river ice because all trails in through the badlands had been snow blocked since No-

vember by deep drifts, now winter-frozen.

He was riding Big Jimmer's rat-tailed apaloosa, and that told me all I needed to know. The long legged, rawboned black apaloosa with saucer size spots spattering his rump, had carried, at one time or another, about every member of the old Kid Curry Gang. If Big Jimmer loaned a man the big apaloosa it was his mounted passport wherever the Wild Bunch had friends.



The Kid thought Shorty was his pard for life—until he discovered they were powdersmoke targets for a skunk in law-dog's clothing.

It must have been about twenty below. The tabs of his muskrat cap were tied down. He wore overshoes and black angora wool chaps and one of those sawed-off buffalo overcoats the cavalry used to issue to its troopers. But the frogs of his overcoat were unfastened and it hung open so he could get to his six-shooter. He had a jug of old Tex's Rocky Point likker tied by a whang leather string from his saddle horn. Every long-legged step the big

apaloosa took, the sharp calks of his shoes bit into the deep ice with a sharp crunching sound.

A growth of sandy whiskers covered his face and above the whiskers his cheekbones were frost blackened. A pair of hard blue puckered eyes looked me over as he pulled up. He sat his saddle and leaned a little forward across his saddle horn. There was laughter somewhere beneath his sky blue puckered eyes, but it was too

deep hidden for me to find it. He looked tough and dangerous, and I knew he was on the dodge. I wasn't much to look at—a five-foot six fuzzy faced, frost peeled kid, in an old faded mackinaw shirt and blanket lined canvas pants shoved into the tops of four buckle overshoes, wearing a red flannel lined muskrat cap; standing on a half unloaded hayrack on bobsled runners, a hayfork in my hands, scattering hay to a couple of hundred head of cattle. I wouldn't weigh a hundred and thirty, soaking wet. But I could do a man's work any day.

I felt kinda shy and squirmy and puny-sized under that cold stare. And I must have showed it, because his whiskered face spread in a grin that squinted his eyes almost shut.

He twisted half around in his saddle and jerked loose the saddle strings that tied on a bulgy gunnysack. He tossed it into the hayrack.

"Any kid likes candy," he said.

It wasn't all candy. But there was about five pounds of horehound and striped peppermint and gum drops, mixed in with the heavy boxes of .45 and .30-.30 cartridges.

"Seen any strangers lately, Pardner?"

"No, sir."

"You all alone here?" he wanted to know.

"My camp pardner pulled out in November. Claimed he had a toothache. He fergot to come back. I bin alone ever since."

"Hell of a way to leave a kid. Supposin' you fell off a haystack or a horse kicked you, and you got a laig busted? Or taken down sick with distemper?" His whiskered grin slackened so.

"I bin too busy choppin' waterholes and shovelin' hay," I grinned, "to give it much thought."

"Who in hell'd look after the cattle and tend to your horses?" He seemed worried about it. "That's the hell of it when you're

a-workin' for kinfolks. They expect too much from a button of a kid. That's one reason I run off from a good home with too many older brothers when I was fourteen. They never heard from me since and I'm on the yonder side of thirty." His whiskered grin flattened.

"I don't reckon any of my kin would claim me now." He slipped the whang leather loop from his saddle horn and uncorked the jug. "So what the hell, so what the hell!" He had the jug half way to his mouth.

"You'd know Wes Richards, the law man around Landusky? You'd know that glory hunter when you sighted him?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"He bin down along the river lately?"

"No. He's bin told to stay off the Circle C ranch or any of the outfit's line camps, without he packed a search warrant. Ol' Tex down at Rocky Point claims he has a bear trap set for Wes."

"What would you do, Pardner, if Wes Richards was to show up?" He was sorta feeling me out.

Wes was bigger'n a skinned mule, tough as a boot. But so were a lot of men. I'd been brought up not to be scared of any man. The only men that had the fear put into me were my two older half-brothers. I toed the line for them. If they'd told me to take a shot at Wes or any man, I reckon I'd have taken my chances on it. I was more scared of either of them than I was of a corral full of men like Wes Richards, Town Marshal of Landusky.

"Supposin'," he made it plainer, "I was stayin' here. I'd gone to Rocky Point to git a jug filled. Wes 'ud show up. How'd you handle it?"

I pointed out a last year's haystack at the lower end of the field, fenced off with barb wire.

"If I was to set fire to that haystack, you'd know somebody was here." I did some quick thinking.

"Be a waste of good hay, Pardner." He took a good drink.

"It's mostly buckbrush and tule grass cut along the crick," I grinned a little, to carry out his joshing.

"You call me Shorty, Pardner. I reckon we'll git along." He corked the jug and tapped the brown jug with his knuckles.

"A man like me has to git blind drunk, when he can't stand livin' with hisself any longer. Blind, stinkin' drunk.

"Times like that, I'll be shore at your mercy, Pardner. You'll have to stand guard. Big Jimmer tells me you'll do to take along."

I could take a cussing out and never bat an eye, but I wasn't used to praise like that, and I got red-eared. Shorty must have sensed how foolish I felt because he said he'd put up his horse and then lend me a hand.

That night after supper Shorty nibbled at his jug, while I went on a stick candy jag.

SHORTY had a .30-.30 saddle carbine and two single action Frontier model Colt six-shooters. He spent a lot of time with those guns, especially the two hand guns. One had a seven inch barrel and an almost stiff trigger pull, which he packed in a holster on his cartridge belt. The other six-shooter had a sawed-off barrel and a hair trigger. It was one hell of a dangerous gun for any man to handle—just look at it cross-eyed and it would go off. He carried it in a shoulder holster under his left armpit. He always saw to it that the gun was empty before he let me handle it. It had an ivory handle and some men claim a white handled gun is unlucky.

"I don't work under such foolish handicap," Shorty read the question in my eyes.

Shorty stood about five feet eight. He was heavy shouldered and lean flanked and flat bellied. His legs were a little saddle-bowed, and he had a quick way of

moving about and getting things done.

Somebody had papered the inside of the log cabin last fall. They'd used old newspapers and flour and water paste. Evenings when there was nothing to do till bedtime, I'd read those old yellowed newspapers. There was one pasted on upside down within a couple of feet from the floor. I was showing Shorty how I could read it by squatting on my hunkers, one evening by candlelight after we'd cleaned up the supper dishes. He grinned admiringly. He was standing in his shirt and pants and sock feet in the middle of the floor. He hinged his legs, did a flip and landed on his hands. He handwalked to the wall and did a handstand while he read the upside down paper. Then he flipped over and onto his sock feet and grinned. He kept himself limber as an acrobat.

He'd practice drawing his guns and he was chain lightning with either gun. He always shot at a moving target. He'd hand me a silver dollar and I'd throw the coin up in the air. He'd draw either gun and hit it in mid-air. When he ran out of silver dollars, then half dollars, he'd use small rocks. I can't remember his ever having missed a shot, sober or tipsy.

Shorty never told me his name. Never dug up any of his back trail for me. For the most part he used the careless illiterate lingo of the cow country. Only when he got over the tipsy edge did he use words or phrases no cowhand uses, and quotations from books the average cowpuncher never read or even heard about. Somewhere, and it was in the Southwest, Shorty had come from gentlefolks. I will always believe that it was the most important thing in his life to guard his identity. To keep his outlaw's disgrace from tainting his family name, and he did all he possibly could to guard that secret.

Shorty made two trips to Rocky Point. To get his jug filled and to pick up any

messages left for him at the post office or leave some message there. He always brought back all the candy they had at the store, old magazines and newspapers.

"A kid likes candy," he'd say.

I'd drank more than my share of beer and hard likker for a kid my age. I liked the taste of it and the effects of a jag. But Shorty never offered me a drink from his jug and I never took one. Shorty would get blind drunk and tell me to stand guard. He was never loud-mouthed. Never did any bragging. Never got ornery or quarrelsome. But the hidden laughter would die out in his eyes like the coals of a dying campfire, and leave them dark shadowed with brooding. And sometimes he'd toss on his bunk and moan low inside like he was hurt, the wound never healed. His eyes had a glaze over them in the candlelight. The next day he'd be sick as a poisoned dog.

One bright moonlight night, I felt Shorty's hand grip my shoulder in the dark cabin. Like most kids I was a sound sleeper. I sat up, listening. Not saying a word. Not knowing what he'd heard outside. Then it came. The sound of a trail hound baying. It sounded quite a ways off. Shorty cupped a match flame to light his cigaret. He was fully dressed and had his guns on. The match flame showed his eyes, slivers of chilled steel. The frost blackened skin of his cheekbones looked grayish.

"That's only Joe Legg's Dinah." I knew that darned old bloodhound's bugle call when she was on a mountain lion's trail. We once tried taking that long-eared pot hound along with the pack of greyhounds and wolfhounds we kept at the Circle C ranch. Our hounds ran by sight, not smell, and they'd have a coyote stretched out and killed and the pups worrying the carcass by the time Dinah got there, her nose along the coyote tracks that were all fouled up with the tracks of the hound pack. I've seen old Dinah look

up, then set down and tilt her nose in the sky and let out her mournful howl till you like to busted a gut to keep from laughing. Dinah and old Joe Legg were almighty touchy and thin-skinned about any ridicule.

I got dressed and went out. Dinah was on one of her lonesome prowls. She'd treed her lion in a bare limbed cottonwood, and sat there howling. Now that she had the lion treed she found out that she was a long ways from home and old Joe's bunk that she shared with him, tarp, blankets, soogans and her long-eared head on the same pillow. She was empty bellied to boot. So, leg-weary I had to pack her, like she would expect old Joe Legg to pack her in his arms.

"Here's your Hound of the Baskervilles," I told Shorty. "Sherlock Holmes' hound of hell." Dinah kept licking at my face.

"The hounds they keep at prison," Shorty forced a grin, "don't lick a man's face. They tear his throat apart." He opened his shirt collar. His hand went up to a ragged scar that showed just to one side of his throat and along the hard muscles of his collarbone. Dinah wouldn't harm a cottontail rabbit, but Shorty moved away from the aging bloodhound and never once patted her. I took her back to Joe Legg's place down the river. I had to carry her across my saddle. She slept all the way, twitching and whimpering in her dreams about that lion hunt. My arms ached for a week. The lion got away. Shorty never killed a lion or wolf or coyote. He wouldn't kill a deer or antelope for meat unless he was starving, he said. They were like him. Those animals belonged to the Hunted.

Up until then I liked to hunt. There was always venison in camp. But I never lined sights on so much as a jackrabbit after those brief months in a winter line camp with Shorty.

That, among other things, I learned

from the best line camp pardner a man ever had. Shorty was never a man to preach. You just found yourself patterning your ways after his way. A cow country kid learns most of his lessons that way. He's apt to pick up a lot of bad habits. But if he lives that long, he'll outgrow 'em. But I can't recall any bad habits I ever picked up from Shorty. By the time the big warm Chinook wind cut the snowdrifts and the ice commenced to break up in the wide Missouri river, I'd grown mighty close to the man. I'd have burned a church for him, as the saying goes. Or go through hell and high water for Shorty. I never said so, but Shorty knew it when it came time to move the cattle I'd been wintering, up through the badlands and onto summer range. Neither of us ever put much of what we thought into talk. When a man has savvy, he don't need words.

SOMETIME between bedtime and day-break the big Chinook started. The warm wind came in the night and I woke up from a sound sleep when the snow commenced melting on the sod roof and started drip-dripping outside. To a cowhand, snowbound in a winter line camp, the friendly whine of the warm Chinook wind in the early spring is the most wonderful tune on earth. It means release from long weeks and months of snow-bound frozen prison. It makes a man want

to yank open the cabin door and stand there bareheaded in his red flannels and sock feet that are his nightclothes, and let the water drip down on him from the roof and melting icicles, and shout and yell and holler. Or say some kind of a prayer.

It was dark inside the cabin but sounds came from Shorty's bunk and I knew he was pulling on his boots. The flare of the match flame cupped in Shorty's hands showed his sandy whiskered face and the reckless laugh always hidden in his puckered blue eyes.

"Reckon a man has time to make it to Rocky Point and back, before the ice breaks in the river, Pardner?"

"Providin' you don't stay more'n a day or two. There'll be a couple of feet of water on the ice inside twenty-four hours," I said.

Shorty was gone longer than that. I could hear the ice boom like a cannon in the night. When the snow slid off the high bluffs down at the Narrows the following morning it was like a snow volcano erupting.

Shorty's big apaloosa splashed through two feet of ice water when he waded ashore. He had thrown away his old muskrat cap and had a brand new Stetson hat cocked on his head. And he fetched me the mate to it in a clean gunnysack. His coat was thrown open and he was singing "Hell Among the Yearlin's" in an off-key voice. It was a shore welcome sound

**BROKER
NO
JOKER**



EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill.—
"I mean it when I ask for Calvert," says Max Adelman, insurance broker of this city. "I switched to Calvert long ago, because I like its better taste. And with me it's the taste that counts."

in my ears. I had missed him plenty.

*"Me and my Pardner,
And my Pardner's friend,
Roped all the horses,
In the Horseshoe bend."*

Shorty pulled the jug cork with his teeth and cocked his head sideways as he took a drink. His grin traveled up through his sandy whiskers to pucker the laughter in his blue eyes. He never called me any other name but Pardner. But he didn't have me in mind when he sang that song of the dim trails. I knew what he meant. Shorty had picked up his mail at the hidden post office at Rocky Point. From time to time during his stay at the line camp, he had dropped a more or less vague hint about the three of 'em. I didn't have to stand at the head of my class to catch on to what Shorty meant.

"I ketched up with the big news at the Point," he said. "That's what throwed me late. They pulled out when I did. They'll be waitin' for me at Big Jimmer's place." Shorty's blue eyes frosted over.

"That glory bounty huntin' wolfer, Wes Richards, has been sendin' out word that he's got a bench warrant for me, from where he's settin', his chair tilted back and warmin' his belly at the saloon stove in Landusky. The damned badge polisher!" Shorty's laugh had an ugly sound as he pulled off his saddle, and commenced wiping the water off the apaloosa's legs with a dry gunnysack.

It took a couple-three weeks for the drifts to melt and the mud to dry, before we could move the cattle up through the badlands and turn 'em loose on summer range. I couldn't help but notice the change that had come over Shorty. He was getting impatient and restless and I knew he was rearin' to go. The Rock Creek line camp, no longer snowbound, became unsafe and dangerous for a man on the dodge. Shorty tamped the cork down in the brown jug with the heel of

his hand and let it stay when he shoved the jug in under his bunk.

Almost every night I'd wake up and find his bunk empty. The Chinook wind had slid the thick coating of frost from the cabin windows and he'd nailed heavy canvas strips he'd cut from the wagon sheet we used to cover the beef. I'd lift a corner and look out and I'd catch sight of Shorty on the prow outside with his saddle gun ready. It would have been hard luck for Wes Richards or any other law officer if they'd tried to slip up on the line camp of a night.

I told Shorty I could handle it alone, but he grinned it off.

"A feller has to wait fer the green grass to come, before the sign is right to travel yonderly."

Those next weeks weren't easy on either of us. Shorty's restless itch was catching. But we stuck it out till it was time to move the cattle out. We trimmed each other's hair with an old pair of sheep shears. Shorty trimmed the rough edges off his whiskers. I never took much notice of the white in his sand colored hair until I swept his hair clippings off the floor into a home made dustpan. I swear he hadn't been that gray headed when he came, but I could have been wrong. When you're a fuzzy faced kid, a few gray hairs in a man's head means he's an old man. But Shorty wasn't that old.

CHAPTER

2

Lone Cowpoke

We moved the cattle out slow, grazing them all the way up through the rough breaks and onto the rolling hills. We packed what grub we needed in a sack and we slept in my bed and packed the outfit on my extra horse. We left the work team behind on pasture.

We tallied the cattle out and dropped them in with some scattered cattle that grazed on feed and water. I led my bed

horse and we rode along the old freight road, silent for the most part. It was coming near the time when our trails would fork. I'd head for the Circle C ranch, and Shorty would take the West fork that led to Big Jimmer's place south of the Little Rockies. The main road led to Landusky.

When we came to the dim wagon road that led to Big Jimmer's ranch, we rode past it. "That's the trail to Big Jimmer's," I pointed out.

"So I figgered, but I'm goin' to Landusky." Shorty jerked a thumb eastward. "Them's the two Circle C Buttes, Pardner,"

Shorty wasn't much of a hand at saying farewell. The formality of shaking hands is awkward to most cowhands. So he had a sack of tobacco in one hand and a cigarette paper in the other.

"Well, so-long, Pardner. Good luck."

"I'm goin' to Landusky." I made a sudden decision. The thin rice paper in his hands broke and spilled tobacco down his shirt. His blue eyes squinted a little and frosted over.

"I got business at Landusky, Pardner." His voice was cold, flat toned. "And it don't come under the head of any monkey business." Shorty paused a moment, then added curtly. "You'd be underfoot."

That hurt, as much as Shorty figured it would. I blew up. All those mixed up kid notions that milled around inside me came out. Cussing come natural to a cow country kid that's picked it up since he was this high.

"I ain't seen town in so long I've fergot what anything bigger'n one log cabin and a stable and cowshed looks like. I've et stick candy while you drunk Rocky Point likker. The Circle C outfit left me alone when my line camp pardner rode away to git a damned tooth pulled and never come back. If you hadn't showed up, I'd wintered there alone. A man kin go plumb locoed snowed in and talkin' to hisself

like a crazy sheepherder. I got a winter's wages comin' and I'm goin' to spend it all. To hell with workin' with kinfolks. I got a bellyfull." I must have sounded like some kid robbed of his jellybeans.

Shorty kept rubbing his hand across his whiskered mouth. He let me run down like an alarm clock. But when I got the red outta my eyes I could see his eyes shining and the sun in 'em. You can't spend weeks together in a line camp without getting a mighty near-complete idea of a kid like I was then.

"Looks like you shore got 'er made, Pardner. A man's got a right to cuss out his own outfit, but the Circle C has treated me right. I don't want 'em to think I let the leastest 'un of the boys git into trouble. That wouldn't do either of us no good. But you got 'er made, so I'll take you along. You do like I tell you and mebbys you won't git too much underfoot." His weather bleached brows pulled together.

"I don't know this badge polisher Wes Richards by sight. Mebbys it'll save time if you kin point him out fer me."

"You bet. I know the saloon where he hangs out. I'll be proud to point that big bulldozer out."

"You'll be settin' straddle of your horse, holdin' my bridle reins. You'll be on the outside a-lookin' in. Thataway you kin do us both the most good. If you hear a gun go off, you hightail it. Don't look back and don't pull up till your horse is wind-ed. That's the deal, or you don't go along."

"It's a deal, Shorty."

Shorty timed it right and we rode up the street that was no more than a wide gulch between the row of log cabins, saloons for the most part, or miner's cabins. We got there after dark and by the light of a lopsided white moon. We pulled up at the empty hitchrack in front of the saloon where Wes hung out. All a man had to do was to lean across his

saddle horn to see in over the short swinging half doors into the lamplit saloon. About a dozen men, hard rock miners and a couple of cowhands and a freighter, were lined up at the bar. The saloon man was behind the bar. I pointed out Town Marshal Wes Richards sitting alone at a corner poker table playing solitaire. Wes always sat with his chair backed against the wall and facing the door.

"That's him. The big dark complected feller with black hair like an Injun. He's bad medicine," I told Shorty.

Shorty was off his horse, handing me his bridle reins. The look in his eyes warned me about keeping my end of the deal. He'd shed his coat and was in his shirtsleeves. I saw him hitch up his cartridge belt as he shouldered through the half doors. I slid my six-shooter from my chaps pocket. My heart kept pounding the blood into my throat till I felt sort of choked down. The night air was chilly but I had pulled off my right glove and the palm of my hand felt sweaty against the butt of my gun.

I watched Wes look up from his game of solitaire and saw his almost swarthy skin turn a sickly yellow. His black eyes narrowed as he pulled up the slack in his jaw. Wes sported a barber-trimmed black mustache and his lips were pulled back to show his teeth. Wes had been caught off-balance and he couldn't hide the fear that chilled his guts. But he was going through the motions of putting on a tough show and he was falling down on the job. Wes was almighty damned careful to keep both his hands in sight on top of the card table. He had the deck of cards in his left hand, one card he was about to lay down in his right hand, and the right hand frozen where it hung in mid-air.

It looked from where I sat my horse like Wes had a good description of Shorty and recognized him the instant he shouldered through the swinging half doors. But he knew it was suicide if he made a

gun move. Shorty had sized up the men lined at the bar with one quick look and passed them up as neutral. He might have cut one hard warning look at the saloon keeper behind the bar because the big whiskey soaked potgut almost raised his hands and his jowled bloated face was a mottled purple.

SHORTY paid them no attention. He'd thrown away his overshoes and he wore spurs on his boots, and each step he took towards Wes at his corner table, made a spur tinkle. The spur noise and the clump of a boot heel was the only sound that broke the silence. I could hear the sound plumb outside. Shorty pulled up when he stood against the big round topped green covered table, both hands empty. But his shoulders and arms were tensed and both hands had the fingers spread a little and the thumbs sticking out like they were about to claw for a gun butt.

"That black Jack of Spades," Shorty's flat toned voice fell loud across the hushed silence. "Goes on that red Queen of Hearts."

Shorty waited for Wes to lay the card down, watching his right hand.

"You bin carryin' my bench warrant too long. Serve it right now. Or throw it away." Shorty never lifted his voice, but the sound of it sent a cold icy wire along my spine.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about." Wes tried to put a tough sound into it. "I never saw you before."

I doubt if any man there saw Shorty's hand move, but the sawed-off hair triggered ivory handled gun was in it and the gun cocked and pointed at Wes's brisket.

"You know who I am. Empty your pockets, you yellow backed son."

Wes emptied his coat pockets, his jaundiced yellow skin breaking out in sweat beads that glistened in the lamplight. The last thing he pulled from an inside coat

pocket was a long brown manila envelope with the corners worn and frayed.

Shorty's low chuckle had a gritty sound. "Let's have a look at it."

Wes looked sick as he slid the bench warrant out of the envelope.

"Eat it," said Shorty.

"Uh?" Wes kinda grunted it.

"Eat it, you son!" Shorty spat the words across the table and into Wes's face.

Almost any second I expected the hair triggered gun to explode. I didn't know I was holding my breath till Wes picked up the bench warrant and bit off a corner and commenced chewing. Then my breath came out with a whooshing sigh. I don't know how long it took for Wes to eat the bench warrant. He kept tearing off big chunks of paper with his teeth and chewing and swallowing them down with a gulp. He was sweating.

Wes packed his gun in an open shoulder holster fitted with a spring. I'd watched him demonstrate how fast he could pull the gun. He'd grab the butt and yank and the stiff spring would release and the gun would be in his hand. It was a .38 Special Colt with a short barrel. Double or single action. It was a beautiful, handsome, wicked looking gun with a checkered hardwood grip. A quicker, faster, more rapid shooting hand gun than the old Frontier Model 45. Time after time Wes Richards had showed off how fast and deadly he was with the gun.

But there was Shorty standing across the table, watching him with eyes as bleak and cold blue as a winter sky, with a sawed off .45 in his hand. Hair triggered so that all you had to do was breath and she'd go off. That was how close Wes Richards was to sudden death, and he didn't need anybody to tell him.

The big saloon man kept spilling raw whiskey into a shot glass in his other hand, gulping the raw whiskey down, every time Wes swallowed a torn hunk of

paper. The men at the bar were watching not daring to speak, or grin. They stood with their backs against the bar, frozen, wooden-faced. They were all holding their breath like they'd been hypnotized. Shorty had actually taken over.

When Wes had gulped down his last wad, he leaned back, trickles of sweat running down his face. He looked sick as a dog that has picked up a strychnine wolf bait.

"Without salt," Shorty was looking at him in mock admiration. He lowered the hammer on the hair triggered gun and slid it back into its home made armpit holster, then deliberately turned his back on Wes and walked past the men that lined the bar and the bug-eyed saloonman. His spurs jingling and his boot heels making a mocking, taunting sound in the silence. Just before Shorty reached the swinging doors, he whirled around. It was one of those abrupt spins like an acrobat uses. I half expected him to do a hand-spring. Wes shrank back in his chair, a discordant thin sound torn from his throat. He flung both arms across his face, like he expected Shorty to gut shoot him.

Shorty stood there, empty handed, a half grin on his whiskered face.

"I'll be at Big Jimmer's, whenever you feel lucky."

Shorty came out and took the bridle reins I was holding. I forgot about the gun in my hand till he spoke.

"Put that thing away." His voice sounded gritty as he swung up on the apaloosa.

I put my gun back in my chaps pocket and rode alongside him, leading my bed horse. I had sense enough to keep my mouth shut. Shorty did not break the silence till we reached the forks of the road, a few miles below town.

He pointed to the trail leading to the Circle C ranch. "After all, Pardner," the ice melted in his eyes, "There's no place like home." His grin faded and the light

died in his eyes. He looked at the butt of the gun showing from my chaps pocket, then at me. I felt sort of awkward inside.

"You'll do to take along." Then he shoved out his hand and I took it. "You won't be seein' me no more. So-long, Pardner." Shorty let go my hand and headed down the trail that led to Big Jimmer's ranch. I headed for the home ranch. There was an empty kind of ache inside my belly. My throat felt tight. I tried three times before I got a cigaret rolled, and then the tobacco smoke had a bitter taste in my mouth.

It was a twenty-five mile ride home and I traveled it slow. I was glad I did not meet anybody that night, because I felt sort of sick inside. It was the feeling a man has when he goes to the funeral of a good friend. Thoughts flashed through my mind, like laughter hidden deep below a pair of sky blue puckered eyes, and "Hell Among the Yearlin's" sung in an off-key.

THE Circle C outfit was paying me forty a month and they saw to it that I earned the daily pay of one dollar and thirty-three and one-third cents. We used to say we earned the one third of a cent after dark when it was too damn dark to count the change.

Only one thing of any importance happened in the way of news. Wes had turned in his law badge and disappeared.

It was a month before I pulled up long enough to get my wind. Then I was sent over to the horse camp to look after the remuda until the calf roundup started. The remuda was inside the big horse pasture and all I had to do was ride fence and see that nobody left a gate open. I had a nosebag half full of staples hung on my saddle horn. A claw hammer tied on with saddle strings. I was gentling a two year old gelding I'd bought, roping at every clump of sagebrush and greasewood. All I had to do those spring days was watch the

shadow me and my pony made. It was pickin's.

The log cabin and pole corrals were near the west gate. I was cooking early breakfast and the sun wasn't up yet when I sighted Big Jimmer. He'd opend the gate and was shoving three head of horses through. Three good stout grain fed ridge runners, and one of them was the rat tailed spotted rump apaloosa.

Jimmer shut the gate and rode over for breakfast. We sat around a while after we did the dishes, working on our last cup of coffee.

"You might keep an eye on them three horses I dropped in the pasture, so's they don't stray too far. A friend of yours might show up along to'rds evenin'. Mebbyso he'll have a couple of fellers with him.

"If nobody shows up to-morrow-next day," Big Jimmer drank the rest of his coffee and stood up. "You kin throw 'em into the remuda."

I wanted to ask about Shorty. I wanted to ask a lot of questions so bad I was near bustin'. But I had sense enough to keep my kid mouth shut. Big Jimmer was like a daddy to me, but he was a man you didn't bother with questions.

Big Jimmer rode off and I watched him ride away. A big man, inside and out. Nobody had ever uncovered any snake tracks along his back trail. He had the respect of every man in the Montana cow country. Soft spoken, easy going. But there was something in Big Jimmer's eyes that held any man at gun point when they got too curious. His ranch was one place an outlaw was welcome, and a man on the dodge felt safe. He was a friend to any man who was a friend to him. Even law officers respected Big Jimmer for what he was.

I didn't ride any fence that day. I took the nosebag with the staples and put the claw hammer in it and hung it in the barn. I cleaned my six-shooter and sad-

dle gun, and I rode close herd on the three horses Big Jimmer had left. My neck was kinked and stiff by sundown and my eyes felt like they was filled with sand, watching the skyline.

I kept a pot of strong coffee on the back of the stove and cooked up a big batch of biscuits and a mulligan stew because that "hooligan" as Shorty always called it was his favorite dish. I used up a lot of cordwood that day, keeping the stuff warmed up.

After sundown, my high hopes began to sink. Like they'd gone down with the sunset. At dusk I corraled the three horses and tied them in the barn and fed 'em hay. I didn't unsaddle. Just loosened the saddle cinch when I put my horse in the barn. I was as nervous and scratchy as a feller with the seven year itch. I remembered I hadn't eaten since early breakfast so I piled a little "hooligan" on my plate and took a biscuit and poured a cup of black coffee. The grub tasted like so much sawdust mixed with glue. The coffee was bitter as quinine. Tobacco had a flat taste. I kept walking around outside aimlessly. I didn't know whether to keep the lantern lit or leave the horse camp dark. I blew out the lantern, finally. I had no watch so I had to go by sun-time. At night I could tell the time by the way the lopsided moon traveled across the sky. Any little sound and I'd freeze, staring into the night. That night was the longest night of my life, bar none. Daylight streaked the sky. I watered the horses and that gave me something to do. By sunrise I had that hopeless, all gone feeling a man gets when he knows that it's no use in waiting any longer.

boots on. I was on the prowl between the barn and corrals and cabin when I sighted a lone rider. But it wasn't Shorty. And it wasn't Big Jimmer. It was the horse wrangler, come to take my place. He gave me a hard look as he handed me a long legal looking letter.

"You look like you was comin' down with distemper." He shoved the envelope at me. I asked him what it was.

"It's a bench warrant. The Sheriff handed it to the stage driver to serve on you. So you can't be considered too dangerous a character."

It turned out to be a subpoena.

"You're not to bother goin' to the home ranch. You're to head for the county seat at Chinook, and you're to hightail it right now, so's you'll be in time for the coroner's inquest."

"How's that, again. What coroner's inquest?" I asked.

"Three fellers tried to rob the bank at Chinook. Two of 'em shot down inside the bank. The feller holdin' the horses was shot loose makin' a gitaway. They figger you might be able to identify one of 'em."

It was a gutshot. No, it was more like a knife between the shoulder blades. A dull, saw-edged rusty knife shoved in a man's back slow and the blade twisted, and the handle left sticking out.

I turned Big Jimmer's three horses loose. Shorty wouldn't be needing the big apaloosa. I rode the first few miles of the sixty-mile trail blinded. I didn't know I was bawling till the salty taste got into my mouth. After a while I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and made the rest of the miles fast. I knew where to change horses and I rode each fresh mount like I was a pony express mail carrier.

Rat teeth chewed at my guts. I'd always bin told, ever since I was big enough to be lifted into a saddle, to care for my own horse before I thought about myself. But that day when I reached town I handed the horse I rode over to the barn

BUT I waited all that day. And a part of the next night. I hadn't taken off my clothes. I still had my hat and

man, and headed for the court house.

The court room was crowded. A man with a badge stopped me at the door and I showed him the crumpled subpoena paper and he let me go in. There were a lot of men, mostly strangers, sitting kinda stiff and awkward. Then I spotted Big Jimmer and I felt better. He was sitting alongside Sheriff Ike Niber. I'd known Ike since he used to run the Circle C wagon. Ike had a slow grin and friendly eyes. Ike came over to where I was standing like a mammyless calf at a roundup. Every damned pair of eyes in there was staring at me. Ike shook my hand and said he wasn't expecting me so soon.

"You better take your hat off," Ike said in a low tone. "And pull your shirt-tail down over that cannon you got stuck in your Levis."

There was a raised platform and behind that a pair of double doors propped open. Laid out on some planks set on saw-horses showed three humps covered with a big sheet. Ike nodded for me to follow. He wasn't the same Ike that used to set around a roundup fire swapping windies and singing cowpuncher songs. His face looked stern and grim and his eyes were no longer lighted up with fun. They were the cold eyes of a peace officer. Without a hint of warning Ike pulled the big sheet off.

Three dead men lay there. Their clothes were spattered with dried blood. What blood was on their faces and hands hadn't been washed off.

I stood there, tracked. I had a hunch what was coming. All that a human being can feel inside him had come to the surface back at the horse camp and I felt dead inside. I must have cut a shore sorry figure as I stood there, a fuzzy faced, dirty necked kid that needed a haircut. In an old black sateen shirt with old sweat marks and a pair of old wore-out Levis and rusty boots. I hadn't taken off my spurs and I stood gripping my hat. A

dirty faced kid, staring at three dead men.

"Which one of those three men," it was the coroner who did the talking from where he sat back in his chair on the platform, "do you recognize?"

I tried not to look at Shorty who lay in the middle. His eyelids were closed over the eyes I knew. Blood spattered the sandy whiskers on his face. Above the whiskers his skin was gray and the old black scars of winter frostbite looked like smudges. I tried to look at the dead men on either side of him, but my eyes kept coming back to him.

"You know one of those men," The coroner's voice was sharper now, like sandpaper. "Speak up!"

I turned and looked straight at him, and I hated him on sight.

"I don't know any of the dead men," I spoke up.

"One of those men wintered at the Rock Creek line camp with you. Which one was it?"

"I don't know any of those three dead men!" I stuck to those words. They couldn't get any more out of me. They'd forgot to swear me in. They made me raise my right hand and repeat what the man said. There was a book on the table in front of us. It might have been a Bible. It might have been a last year's Almanac, so far as I was concerned. They asked me again, and they got the same answer. And that's all they ever got, or ever would get out of me. Because, while I was raising my hand, I caught sight of Wes Richards standing back near the door alongside the badge polisher who had let me in. Every time I answered that question, put to me in half a dozen ways, I was looking at Wes when I gave my same answer. It was perjury and there's a jail term and fine that goes along with it. I didn't give a tinker's damn. I was thinking of other written rules, called the Commandments of God. I've broken a lot of 'em, from time to time. Mebbyso I was busting one

now but I didn't figure it that way. Shorty was dead. Alive or dead, I'd still burn a church for that man who always called me Pardner. They finally gave it up as a bad job.

BIG JIMMER rode out of town with me. He had a big paper sack full of red apples and another sack of stick candy. We rode along in silence eating apples and candy.

"Mebbyso," Big Jimmer's deep soft voice never jarred the silence. "A feller comes from decent, respectable folks. Something happens and he takes to the dim trails. The feller changes his name and picks one like Shorty that fits him. Nobody thinks about askin' him what his real name is. He plays his tough string out and that's the end of him.

"There's no use in tearin' down the pride of some white-haired old father, or breakin' the heart of a white-haired mother who thinks about the feller like he was a little tike so high. Mebbyso a sister who is married to a fine man down south like in Kentucky, names her son after her kid brother, who ran away from home. No use in hurtin' them folks left behind." Big Jimmer handed me a fresh apple.

"Shorty talked a lot about you while he was hangin' out at my place," Big Jimmer continued. "It worried him some that you had a wild streak in you. He said sometimes it taken only some little thing to

start a kid down the wrong trail. I bet Shorty was right proud of you to-day, and worried some, if a dead man has any worries."

That made me feel warm inside. We rode for a mile or so and nobody spoke. It was Big Jimmer broke it first.

"You know what they kin give a man fer perjury?" he asked quietly.

"They kin throw the key away," I told Big Jimmer. "And they can't make me tell anything. When I git out, I'll drift yonderly."

It was kid talk but I meant it. I reckon Big Jimmer had heard plenty of that kind of talk around his ranch because he nodded and bit off another hunk of apple. He chewed it quite a while and swallowed.

"That's what I mean about a dead man worryin'. But you're one of the big Circle C outfit and I don't think the law will do much about jailin' you. It's big cow outfit like the Circle C that elect the lawmen.

"The law would give a-plenty to find out all about Shorty. If he actually rode with the Wild Bunch or the Hole in the Wall Gang or some other road agent outfit. But they don't know a thing about him. Don't even know him by name, and like as not they'll keep on wonderin'.

"That bench warrant Shorty made Wes eat, was one of them John Doe warrants. Wes is a bounty hunter and he figgered he could dig up some snake tracks along Shorty's trail and collect a bounty on his



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dead hide." Big Jimmer had a bothersome habit of sayin' something like that and lettin' it hang in the air.

"You mean Wes killed Shorty?" I was speakin' out of turn, but I couldn't help it.

Big Jimmer didn't seem to mind. He knew how I felt about it.

"Yeah. Wes killed Shorty." He gnawed the apple core and dug the seeds out with his knife blade and chewed on them. He said most folks never ate apple seeds, but he come from a country where apples was scarce.

"Wes Richards," he began at the beginning, "had no respect for the law. He'd always bin on the other side of the fence and sometimes when it paid, tried to straddle it.

"Nobody wanted the Town Marshal job at Landusky, so Wes got a-holt of a badge and pinned it on and declared himself Town Marshal. He'd use it to hide behind while he gun whipped any man he had it in for or killed a man with a few hundred dollars bounty on his hide. He found out about Shorty who was stayin' at my place and had a John Doe warrant swore out and made a lot of talk about collectin' a big bounty. Shorty heard about it and pulled out. He was aimin' to hole up somewhere for the winter. I told him about you bein' alone at the Rock Crick line camp and staked him to the apaloosa.

"You seen what happened to the John Doe warrant. That's where Shorty made his first big mistake. Either he shoulda stayed plumb away from Wes, or he shoulda used his hair-triggered gun on him.

"Wes Richards was laughed out of town after that. But he kept the law badge and wore it pinned to his undershirt. He'd never been legally sworn in, mind, and never was. He never had any legal backing when he murdered Shorty.

"Wes hid out and laid low. He kept his ear to the ground and had his own

ways of ketchin' up with the latest. When Shorty and two more fellers left my place one night, Wes was on the lookout, and it didn't take too much brains for a renegade like Wes to figger it out. He took the short cut to Chinook. Sheriff Ike Niber was out of town. Wes flashed his tin star on the bank men and he deputized some of the town toughs, and they laid a gun trap for Shorty and the two fellers with him. Even then, Shorty and his Pardner and his Pardner's friend, stood a gamblin' chance. They split up and rode into town, leaving their horses in the alley behind the bank. Shorty and his Pardner went into the bank by the side door. The Pardner's friend held the horses.

"Wes and two-three more was in the bank President's office. The door, the upper half frosted glass, was closed. They was workin' on a quart of the banker's likker for a brave maker. Shorty and his Pardner herded the Cashier and Teller into the vault, which was open. Shorty laid down his gun to shake open a rolled up gunnysack. The gun was cocked and the damned hair trigger went off, sounding loud as a cannon. The recoil kicked the gun across the floor. Then all hell tore loose. Wes and his man was shootin' at Shorty and his Pardner. Shorty clawed for his other gun but he never lived to fire a shot. It was a slaughter. They were all shootin' from behind cover and from first to last it was a damned cowardly bushwhackin'.

"Like I said not killin' Wes was Shorty's first big mistake and filin' the gun trigger till the gun would go off if you looked cross-eyed at it, was his second mistake." Big Jimmer reached into his chaps pocket and pulled out Shorty's gun, and held it out to me.

"I talked Ike outa the gun. Shorty would want you to have it. It's a dangerous gun. Keep it empty. Whenever you get some wild notion, you take that gun out and study it a while, then shove it

back in your warsack where any outlaw gun belongs."

It was as close to preachin' as Big Jimmer could come.

When we got to the Circle C horse camp we ate the first real meal I'd had in I don't recollect how long.

THE horse wrangler had gone back to the home ranch. He'd left a note on the table for me to stay at the horse camp when I got back from Chinook. He'd be back in a week or so and we'd move the remuda to the home ranch for the start of the spring roundup.

Big Jimmer was scowling. He said Wes would likely throw in with his old horse thief gang and he was ornery enough to whittle on the Circle C remuda. He said he didn't like the idea of me being alone. I said I'd manage all right. I'd get my bag of staples and claw hammer and ride fence.

"I'll send a feller over before night to keep you company. You might put the apaloosa in the barn just in case," Big Jimmer said when he saddled a fresh horse and headed for home.

I felt all alone when Big Jimmer rode off. I got a count on the remuda by sundown and nary a horse missing. I found the apaloosa and put him in the barn. A feller gets kinda locoed livin' a lonesome life and like a shepherd talks to his dogs, I told the apaloosa what had happened to Shorty while I fed him cold bakin' powder biscuits and he let on like he understood.

Back in the court room in Chinook the coroner had made me give Sheriff Ike Niber my gun and I forgot to get it back when I left. All the gun I had was the hair triggered sawed off gun that got Shorty killed, and it had the feel of a hot runnin' iron in my chaps pocket. I hated to touch it.

I watered and fed my horse and the apaloosa and left 'em in the barn. I

cleaned up what grub was left over and washed it down with black coffee. Then I opened a box of .45 cartridges and loaded the gun. I was almighty cautious about handling it. I left an empty chamber under the gun hammer and put the gun under my pillow in the bed tarp. Then I went outside to wait for whoever Big Jimmer was sending over from his place.

It was moonrise before anybody showed up. Then it was two riders and both of them rank strangers. They looked tough enough, but there was something about them that was sneaky. They never got off their horses. One of 'em asked which was the trail to Landusky and I pointed it out. He asked was I all alone here and I said I was. I didn't ask them to get down and after a while they rode off again. They kept looking back over their shoulders like coyotes. I never moved from where I stood near the door of the cabin.

When they had gone I went inside and got the gun from my bed and lit the lantern and turned the wick low and shut the door. Then I bushed up along the creek, and sat there eating wild currants and buffalo berries that puckered my mouth. I hadn't gotten much sleep for a long time and my eyes got itchy from watchin' the skyline and I sorta dozed off. Something brought me awake and I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. The gate was about a hundred yards away. A lone horsebacker was leaning down to open the wire gate. He got the gatestick in his hand and backed his horse and laid the wire gate along the fence, like he was leaving it open to drift cattle or horses through.

It was bright moonlight and I knew the horsebacker. It was Wes Richards. I could tell the big spur jingler by the way he sat his horse. The moonlight caught the blued gun metal of the six-shooter he had in his hand. He was riding a big brown gelding that had a fast running walk, and he was headed for the cabin.

The lantern light burned low and showed dim through the window that somebody had busted with a bullet.

I slid the dangerous gun out but I wasn't going to thumb the hammer back till I had it pointed at Wes's belly and was ready to shoot. I had it made to shoot from the brush. It was bushwhacking, but Wes was quick triggered and a crack shot, and I couldn't afford to take chances. He'd find the cabin empty, then he'd ride around on the prowl. He would be bound to pass within twenty feet of where I was bushed up and I had it made to kill him. I wasn't scared, but my hand felt sweaty against the smooth ivory gun butt and my insides were crammed with hate and grief.

Wes rode up to within ten feet of the cabin, the gun tilted in his hand. He acted like he was about to holler out.

I jumped a little as the cabin door jerked open. I didn't have time to see the man standing in the doorway because the gun in his hand was spewing quick jets of flame. He was fast with a gun, the sounds of the shots blending together like an automatic.

Wes' gun spat once but the shot went in the air and then the gun kicked itself out of his hand with the recoil as he clawed at his belly. The sound of his hoarse scream came through the gun explosions and was cut off. Wes weaved in his saddle like a drunken man before he slid off headlong and landed on the ground. The big brown gelding he was riding was gun-broke and never untracked.

The feller in the cabin doorway stepped out. He had put six bullets in Wes and was ejecting the smoking shells from his gun and shoving in fresh cartridges. He pulled the head of a match across the gun butt and lit the cigaret that had gone out, and shoved his gun into its holster. Then he bent down and lifted Wes' dead carcass off the ground and slung it across

the saddle of Wes' gun-broke horse, and used the dead man's ketch rope to tie it on.

All that time I froze there behind the brush, Shorty's gun in my hand. It all happened so sudden-like I was still petrified. I cut a look up at the moon to tell the time of night. I hadn't dozed off for a few seconds, I'd been settin' there sound asleep half the night. It was about time I was makin' a hand, and I showed myself. The man watched me as I came walkin' towards the cabin. He was a stranger to me. A black whiskered man with black eyes, medium height and well built.

"You won't need that gun," he grinned a little.

I didn't know I had the gun in my hand and I shoved it out of sight.

"There was two fellers showed up earlier this evenin'," I tried to make my voice sound careless.

"Wes sent 'em to see if you was alone. By now somebody's scared them and the rest of his horsethief gang plumb outa the country. You was bushed up asleep when I found you, so I left you asleep and waited in the cabin. I'm takin' the apaloosa, and I'll dump this thing off along the stage road where he'll be picked up." He looked at Wes' bullet riddled body.

"A thing like that ain't worth the gunpowder to blow him to hell, but I don't call them six cartridges exactly wasted. I always liked Shorty. He was my friend." He spoke quietly, but his eyes were hard.

He'd ridden one of Big Jimmer's horses and I turned it loose while he threw his saddle on the apaloosa. I had it figured he was one of the Wild Bunch and his name don't count here. I watched him ride off, leading the horse with the dead carcass of Wes Richards tied across the saddle. By the time I walked to the gate to close it he was out of sight.

I made a fresh pot of coffee and rolled a smoke. I got out the gun and was plenty

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Hawett ripped out his gun.



Foreman Llano Dow tried to prove to Boss Beth Faraday that she was a helpless pawn in a range-hog's trap.

By
PHILIP KETCHUM

THE minute that Llano Dow pulled up at the Triangle 7 ranchhouse he could sense that something was wrong. Just what gave him that feeling, he wasn't sure. Perhaps it was that Dab Watkins hadn't shown up to greet him or that Wang, the cook, didn't stick his head out of the kitchen door to grin his welcome. For an instant, Llano regretted the impatience which led him to cut across

SIDEWINDERS' SMOKE-OUT

the country for the ranch rather than to have followed the road to Sawtelle, where he could have at least picked up some word of what had happened during the two weeks that he had been away. Then, shrugging his shoulders, Llano dismounted and tied his horse to the corral fence.

He was a tall young man, broad of shoulder and with a deeply tanned face. His eyes were mild blue and his sandy colored hair never looked very neat. There was a wiry strength in his body that could stand up under a lot of punishment and though he had been in the saddle for the most of the last two days, he didn't look very worn. As he turned toward the house the front door opened and Arn Hewett came out on the porch and at the sight of him, Llano came to an abrupt stop.

Arn Hewett was grinning. He seemed mighty pleased over something. "Pretty quick trip you made," he nodded. "We didn't expect you back so soon."

Llano Dow stared up at the man, wondering what he was doing here. He had known Arn Hewett for several years but had never liked him. For a while after his arrival in the Wasatche basin, Hewett had run a small place on the edge of the badlands. He had had only a small herd and it was rumored that he kept his place as a supply station for an outlaw crowd, then hiding out in the desolate country nearby. This hadn't been proven, however, and a year before, Hewett had sold out and moved into town, where he had been operating a saloon. He was middle-aged but very neat appearing and darkly handsome. When he grinned he showed a double row of perfectly white, even teeth.

"Have him come in, Arn," called a voice from inside the house.

Llano scowled. That was Beth Faraday's voice. Beth Faraday, who had been called home from school three months

after the sudden death of her father. Beth owned the Triangle 7, now, and was managing it, but was still bitter over her father's death. He had been shot but who had shot him wasn't known. Beth seemed inclined to blame the whole basin. Her bitterness had changed her from a sweet, laughing girl into a cold, hard woman.

Hewett said, "Sure, Llano. Come on in." And then moved aside as Llano climbed to the porch and headed for the door.

Beth Faraday stood over at the far side of the room, near her father's desk. She seemed very tall, taller than Llano had remembered, and there was an almost ramrod stiffness in the way she held herself. She wasn't smiling. Her face was thin and her eyes were brown. They looked steadily at Llano.

"You had no trouble?" she asked.

Llano shook his head. From his pocket he took a slip of paper. "Here's the money for the herd. It's in the form of a draft on the Wasatche bank."

He carried the bank draft over to the girl and she took it, glanced at the figure, turned to the desk and endorsed it and then straightened up and looked past Llano to where Arn Hewett was standing, just inside the doorway.

"Here, Arn," she said, holding out the draft. "Have one of the men ride into Wasatche and cash this. I want none of my money in the Wasatche bank."

Llano had hoped that some of Beth's bitterness would be gone by the time he got back, but he knew now that the hope had been in vain. If anything, Beth was more bitter. Llano watched Arn Hewett come forward and accept the draft. "It's too late, today," Hewett mentioned. "I'll take care of this the first thing in the morning."

Llano wanted to ask just where Arn Hewett fitted into the scheme of things at the Triangle 7, but he held the question back. Beth looked at him and then looked

away. There was a tight, strained expression on her face. She said, "Arn, you tell him."

Arn Hewett nodded. "We had a little trouble here about a week ago," he said slowly. "It seems that there was a rock slide up in the Narrows, damming Wasatche creek. Some of the men in the basin rode in to blow up the dam. We had to stop 'em."

Llano stiffened. "You mean the Wasatche's dammed?"

"That's right."

"Then what are the cattle in the basin doing for water?"

"I reckon most of them are doin' without."

THERE was a blunt, harshness in that statement. Llano moistened his lips. This had been a dry year, a hard year for everyone. In the Wasatche, ranchers had fared better than in some places for there was still water in Wasatche creek. But with the creek dammed at the Narrows, every rancher below the Triangle 7 would have found himself without water for his herds. There might be a few wells in the basin still pumping water, but not many, not nearly enough.

"You mentioned a rock slide in the Narrows," Llano said slowly. "You mean, you dynamited the Narrows, don't you?"

Arn Hewett grinned. "Maybe."

"I ordered him to, Llano," Beth Faraday said stiffly.

Llano jerked around to face the girl. "Why, Beth. Why in the world—"

Beth's hands were clenched tightly together. "I told you, Llano, that I would make the basin pay for my father's death."

"But you can't hold every rancher in the Wasatche responsible for what happened to your father."

"Why not? They all hated him. They were all glad when he was killed. What

difference does it make who fired the shot?"

Llano was silent. It was true that old John Faraday hadn't been very popular in the basin. He had been too stubborn a man, too iron-willed, too down right honest to be very well liked. But Beth was way off in thinking that the men of the Wasatche had been pleased by his death.

"My father thought a great deal of you, Llano," Beth went on. He—he was always mentioning you in his letters to me. What I want to know is this. Are you with me in what I'm going or do you want to quit?"

"And what more can you do?" Llano asked flatly.

"Plenty more," Beth snapped. "I've only started."

Llano sucked in a long, slow breath. He turned and moved over to the window and stared out into the ranch yard. Two men whom he had never seen before were leaning against the side of the barn. They were thin, guant, hard faced men and they wore their holsters low and tied down with leather thongs. Llano had the sudden conviction that these were two of the men Hewett had brought in to help him. It was clear that Hewett had been hired by Beth. And a good deal more was now becoming clear. Beth Faraday, in her bitterness over her father's death, had played straight into Hewett's hand. Hewett was now free to go ahead in any way he wished. He could establish here a legitimate headquarters for a band of rustlers and could set about stripping the entire basin. It could all be made to look like a range war. Hewett's crowd could seem to be fighting for Beth Faraday but actually they would be working for themselves.

"Well, Llano?" the girl demanded.

Llano swung around. He moved back across the room, stared at the girl for a moment and then nodded gravely. "All

right, Beth. I'm with you. We'll give this basin a fight they'll never forget."

As he was speaking, Llano glanced over at Hewett. There was a stunned, bewildered expression on Hewett's face and as Llano finished a flush of anger showed on his cheeks. He took a step forward but stopped at the sound of Beth's voice.

"Thanks, Llano," Beth was saying. "I—I didn't feel quite right about it, but if you're with me nothing will ever stop us."

Hewett wheeled and left the room and after he was gone there was a long silence. Llano rolled a cigaret and lit it. He moved back to the window and saw Hewett talking to the two men who had been leaning against the barn. They were all three watching the house.

"You don't like him, do you?" Beth asked. "Arn Hewett, I mean."

Llano shrugged. "He can fight, Beth. And we'll need men who can fight."

"I've hired at least a dozen. Arn found them for me."

Again Llano shrugged. "Was anyone hurt when the men from the basin tried to blow out the dam in the Narrows?"

"There was a lot of shooting, but I don't think anyone was hurt. I—I had a right to dam the creek, Llano. But I would have done it anyhow."

That wasn't true but Llano didn't argue the matter. "We'll talk things over later," he said to the girl. "I want to see Hewett for a minute."

He had a notion that Beth wanted to go on talking but nodding a farewell, Llano turned to the door and stepped outside. Hewett and the other two men were still standing near the barn, watching him, and without any hesitation at all, Llano headed that way.

THE three men spread out a little as he neared them and there was an undeniable tension in the way that they stood. Hewett's face was tight with

anger. His eyes were narrowed and sharp and his hand had lifted and was fumbling with the top button of his vest, only inches from the gun the man carried in a shoulder holster.

"Well, Hewett, what's the game?" Llano asked bluntly.

Hewett moistened his lips. "I don't know what you're talkin' about. Beth hired us to back her up, Llano. That's all."

Llano shook his head. "You've got more stakes up than that an' you're cuttin' me in."

"Are we?"

"Yes. And if you don't like the idea, quit foolin' with that vest button an' claw for your gun."

There was a steel sharp edge to Llano's voice and his eyes had turned as hard as Hewett's. The other two men watched him silently, waiting, he knew, to back up Hewett's play, whatever it might be. If Hewett decided to fight Llano would have no chance at all against the three of them. He knew that, too, but this was a risk that he had to take. There was no other possible course that he could follow.

For perhaps half a minute Hewett's body held rigid, then the man's eyes went past Llano toward the house and he shrugged his shoulders and managed a thin smile. Llano couldn't be sure but he had a notion that Beth had opened the door and had come out on the porch and was watching them; and that Hewett didn't feel strong enough with the girl to risk shooting him down.

"Suppose we talk things over tonight after some of the boys ride in," Hewett suggested.

Llano grinned at the man. "Sure, but don't forget this. If you need the girl for a front, don't count me out. Beth might see through your plans if anything happened to me. She thinks that we're pushin' her grudge against the basin, an' that's all."

Hewett made no answer, and still grinning, Llano turned away. Beth was watching from the porch. Llano waved a hand to her and headed for the foreman's cabin near the end of the bunkhouse.

There was a faint moisture of perspiration on Llano's face as he closed his cabin door behind him. His knees felt a little weak. That talk he had just had with Hewett hadn't settled anything, he knew. Hewett knew him too well to think that he would ever join up with a crowd of outlaws. All that he had succeeded in doing was in postponing things for a few hours.

Llano took off his coat and shirt. He went outside and washed up, came back to the cabin and shaved and put on a clean shirt. After that he made a brief inspection of his gun and then slid it in and out of its holster several times. He was pretty good with a gun, but hardly a match for the kind of men Hewett would have, and he faced that quite frankly. There didn't seem to be an out for him at all. Even if he wanted to and Hewett would agree, he could never bring himself to the point of falling in with Hewett's plans. He had too many friends here in the Sawtelle basin, friends who believed in him.

After a while Llano moved outside. It was late afternoon and the sun was sliding down toward the western hills. From the kitchen came the smell of food. Several more riders came loping in and each of them gave Llano a careful scrutiny.

Leaning back against the corral fence, Llano's thoughts turned back to the night of the old John Faraday's death. Faraday had been shot down only a few miles from town, apparently at about nine o'clock, and on a well-travelled road. The men who had found him had pretty well stomped out any tracks which might have been left by the murderer. There had been only one circumstance on which the sheriff had pinned any hope of finding the guilty man. A diamond stick-pin which

Faraday had always worn had been missing from his tie when he had been picked up. How valuable that diamond was, no one seemed to know, but it had been pretty large, and apparently the murderer hadn't been able to overcome the temptation to take it. Other than that, the murder had been a pretty perfect crime.

Llano smoked one cigaret and then another. He wondered if Hewett could have been the man who had killed old John Faraday and he recalled an evening in Sawtelle when Faraday had sat in a poker game with Hewett and a few others and had run out of money. Hewett, on that occasion, had offered to buy the diamond stick-pin, and a good many other times, Llano now recalled, he had seen Hewett staring at the diamond. The sheriff had questioned Hewett about the murder, of course, but Hewett had an alibi. Nevertheless Llano felt himself growing a little excited as he considered the possibility of Hewett's alibi having been faked.

WANG stuck his head out of the kitchen door and rang the supper bell, and six or eight men, headed by Hewett, came out of the bunkhouse and headed for the dining room, adjoining the kitchen. Llano angled that way. He nodded to Hewett and let his eyes rake over the others in Hewett's crowd. He didn't know any of them but by the hardened expressions on their faces, he knew their type. And it was easy to guess that they had been discussing him.

"Well, have you talked things over?" he asked flatly.

Hewett shrugged. "What's all the rush, Llano?"

Llano stopped. "I've got a proposition to make. Let the others go on in."

Hewett's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I don't get it."

"Here." Llano reached for his gun. He lifted it carefully and held it out to

Hewett, butt-first. "Come on," he insisted. "There's something I want to tell you."

Without waiting for any answer he swung around and headed for the bunkhouse. Hewett hesitated, told the others to go on in to supper, and then followed him.

Around the corner of the bunkhouse and out of sight of the dining room, Llano stopped, and when Hewett joined him he reached into his pocket, drew out a half-emptied sack of tobacco and held it out to the man. "Look in there," he commanded.

Hewett scowled. He accepted the sack of tobacco and felt of it.

"Inside, Hewett," Llano drawled.

Still frowning, Hewett started to open the sack and it was at that moment that Llano's fist smashed straight at his jaw. Every ounce of weight in his body, every bit of strength that he had was back of that blow. A short, startled cry escaped from Hewett's lips and he tried to duck out of the way, dropping the sack of tobacco and clawing for his shoulder holster at the same time.

Llano's blow smashed and lifted the man to his toes and moving in, Llano hit him twice more. A glazed expression came into Hewett's eyes. His knees folded up and he dropped to the ground. Llano stooped over him, found his gun in Hewett's pocket, took it and tapped the man over the head. Then he straightened and stared toward the house. Hewett's cry apparently hadn't been heard. No one was in sight.

On his knees, then, Llano Dow made a swift search of Hewett's body and the clothing the man was wearing, but if Hewett had Faraday's diamond he could find no sign of it. There was one other place to be searched, however—Hewett's quarters in the bunkhouse. Llano stood up and hurried for the bunkhouse door. He found Hewett's quarters and made a

quick search of his things, but there was still no sign of the diamond.

Outside, again, Llano Dow stared soberly at the unconscious man. It had been his thought that if he could find the diamond on Hewett and prove to Beth that Hewett had killed her father, this whole scheme of Hewett's would collapse. Beth would pull out and whether she escaped or was held prisoner here, it would soon be the rest of the basin against Hewett's outlaws, and with the issue that clear, the men of Wasatche basin wouldn't have lost much time in moving in. That plan, however, wasn't much good now, and what he had just done had pretty well settled things for him. In a minute or two, some of Hewett's men would be drifting out here to see what was keeping them and when Hewett was found unconscious, the guns of his men would go into action.

Llano's thoughts again turned back to the possibility that Hewett had killed old John Faraday and in spite of the fact that he hadn't been able to find the diamond he felt that he was right in what he had guessed. Faraday had been disliked by a good many people but there was no one in all the basin who had had any reason for killing him. Hewett, however, had always been attracted by that diamond tie-pin and Faraday, apparently wasn't the kind of a man to let a little thing like murder stand between him and something that he wanted.

The sound of voices reached toward Llano from the direction of the house. Llano stiffened. He jerked around and hurried back into the bunkhouse. There were several lamps in the long, frame room. He opened them, one after another, and splashed the kerosene over the bunks and walls. Then, in half a dozen places he touched a lighted match.

A heavy swirl of smoke filled the room and billowed toward the windows and door. A cry of alarm came from the out-

side and then more cries as the men came hurrying from the kitchen. Llano crouched near the floor, not far from the door, and waited. The crackling of the fire dimmed the cries from the yard. It got terribly hot in the bunkhouse and even the air near the floor burned his throat and brought tears to his eyes. He started coughing. He couldn't wait here very long, he knew. Unless something happened soon he would have to get out and take his chances on what might happen when he burst through the doorway.

He stared that way and suddenly, through the rolling smoke, he made out the figure of Arn Hewett. The man's legs seemed a little unsteady. He caught the frame of the doorway as he came through it, seemed to hesitate for a moment, then plunged on forward, angling toward his bunk. Llano straightened up. He saw Hewett set a box on his bunk and climb up on it and push aside a loosened ceiling board. For a moment the man clawed into the hole above his head. He drew out his hand and shoved something inside his shirt, then stepped down.

"It wouldn't have burned, Hewett," Llano called sharply. "You might have

had a hard time findin' it in the ashes, but diamonds don't burn."

HEWETT jerked around to face him as he started talking, but whether or not he heard everything that he said, Llano never knew. Hewett had stiffened, and his hand, reaching up under his coat, ripped out the gun he carried in his shoulder holster. Its roar mingled with the explosion of the gun in Llano's hand. A bullet pumped into the ceiling above Llano's head. Hewett started swaying from side to side. His gun slipped out of his hand and his body folded over and he slumped to the floor.

It seemed to Llano that his clothing must be on fire. The heat and the flames were scorching the skin of his face. He made it to where Hewett was standing, stooped over him and caught him by the shoulders and started dragging him to the door. In some way or other he got him outside, got him outside and dropped him and then straightened up to face Hewett's crowd.

Perhaps those men didn't understand the fire or why Hewett had gone racing through the door, but they had heard the

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shots that had been fired and were already suspicious of Llano Dow, and as he faced them, Llano knew that there was nothing he could say that would satisfy them. One of the fellows went for his gun and then another. Llano had holstered his own weapon to free his hands so that he could drag Hewett from the bunkhouse. He clawed it up. A bullet caught him in the shoulder and spun him half around. He stumbled and went to his knees. He managed to get in just two shots before a thick fog of darkness swept over him. He didn't hear Beth Faraday screaming at the men or see her race into the house and come out with one of her father's rifles. He didn't know that she pumped shot after shot at that scattering crowd of men who had downed him.

Time after time, it seemed to Llano, he would fight his way up out of the torturing shadows which were holding him, only to have them reach after him and pull him back. But there came finally a day when he opened his eyes and everything in the room held steady and the man in the chair by his bed, nodded and said, "All right, Llano. I guess you'll make it."

The man was Doc Patterson and he looked awfully tired but pretty well pleased with himself.

There was something that Llano had to say. For a moment it eluded him, then he remembered. "Faraday's diamond tie-pin," he said huskily. "Arn Hewett has it. He—"

Doc Patterson nodded. "You've been raving about that pin for days, Llano. We found it and I reckon we've pretty well put together the whole story. Hewett killed Faraday for the diamond, then, when he discovered how bitter Beth was over the death of her father, he moved in here with his crowd, letting Beth think that he was only interested in fighting her battle against the basin. What he really planned I don't know."

"Beth knows that Hewett killed her father?" Llano asked.

"Yep, she knows. But even before she knew she went to Steve McComber and told him to blow out the dam in the Narrows. That's a rather important thing to think about Llano."

Llano frowned.

"It's like this," Patterson went on. "Some of the men in the basin noticed the smoke of the burning bunkhouse and I reckon everyone who saw the smoke headed this way. By the time the first men got here, Hewett's crowd, or rather what was left of them, had pulled out and Beth was trying to look after you."

"Well, I was along an' I got to work on you while the rest of the men set in puttin' out the fire. There wasn't anything unusual in that. We've always acted that way. But I guess that it seemed right unusual to Beth Faraday. She had cut off our water and I reckon we were supposed to sit back and watch her place burn down and laugh at her. When we didn't she decided that we weren't so bad after all. After we got the fire out she sorta choked up and then asked McComber to blow out the dam. Darned if she wasn't crying."

There was a sound at the door. Llano turned his head and looked that way. Beth Faraday had just come into the room, but not the Beth Faraday who had returned here after her father's death. This Beth Faraday was younger and there was a warm light in her eyes.

Doc Patterson stood up. He cleared his throat. He glanced from Llano to Beth and then back again. "Maybe I'd better get out of here," he rumbled. "I reckon you're in safe hands, Llano."

Llano had a notion he was flushing.

Beth turned away. She said, "Don't hurry off, doctor," and then was gone.

But she would be back, Llano realized. After all, Doc Patterson couldn't stay here forever.

OUTLAWS, INC.

To rescue Lilly Hughes from a renegade's reunion—Ev Blades set himself up as buzzard-bait.

By
T. W. FORD

IT WAS still early in the forenoon when Evan Blades sloped into Swellfork, coming all the way down from his horse ranch around behind the south end of the Gunstock Hills. Behind him old Hook creaked along in the ranch wagon. There were supplies to be picked up, of course. And a cracked axle to be fixed at the blacksmith's. But there were two parties young Ev wanted to see in particular. One was the president of the bank about a loan so he could pick up that thoroughbred stallion he'd learned was for sale over in Elk City. The second man he



He worked the triggers of both guns.

had to see was old Torkus, the sheriff.

Coming down the western rim of the Gunstock range with the first pre-dawn light thinning the night, they'd taken the short-cut. Ev had decided to take the rough boulder-strewn track that cut straight over the ridge where it saddle-backed. It would save them about six and a half miles. About halfway over, he sniffed campfire smoke. And then, rounding a bend ahead of the wagon, he saw the gent with the heavy black mustache. He was standing by one of the dew-dripping trees over to the right, a Winchester at ready.

"What the devil are you snooping around here for, gopher, huh?" he had challenged in an ugly-toned voice.

Ev's hand dropped for the walnut butt of his Colts. But it wasn't there. No holster, either. He'd packed it in his saddle roll when they'd left the horse ranch at two this morning. Seemed a nuisance to pack it on his hip. He met the black-mustached man's baleful stare levelly, said:

"Passing through on the short-cut trail. Do you own it?"

The rifleman spat into the brush. "Well, reckon I'll let you pass. But keep moving!"

"What's the matter, Nocky?" called a man back further.

Ev's eyes cut toward the voice, up through a natural aisle in the timber stand, to the camp in the little clearing there. Fresh wood had just been stacked on the smoldering embers of last night's fire. Fresh flame licked up to play on the tall stoop-shouldered figure beside it. It's yellow glow revealed the man's blond hair, washed his face with light, showed the long nose and those light-blue eyes with that wild look. Patch Jones, the outlaw! Ev recognized him from having seen him when he beat that killing charge at the trial over in the Junction.

"Nothing," Nocky called back. "Just a

couple of gophers usin' the short-cut."

After passing through the short-cut, Ev had gotten his gunbelt and Colts from the saddle roll and strapped it on. They'd come on to Swellfork. And now Ev wanted to see the sheriff too, to tell him about Jones being in the country. He told Hook to take the wagon on down to the blacksmith's, then meet him at the General Merchandise Store. Ev himself rode up a side street to the little two-celled jail. But it was closed up, shades down. Sheriff Torkus hadn't arrived yet.

Ev led his cayuse down to the corner where the Cattleman's Bank stood, hitched him to the breeze, and went in with that long purposeful stride of his. He didn't swagger. And he was a little on the stocky side, square-shouldered, not tall and rangy. But somehow you knew Ev Blades made it a habit to get where he was going, to get what he was after. He had a plain blunt-jawed face, but those striking shining black eyes, as round as gun bores, had made more than one woman turn to look after him on the street.

He tongued his lips as he stepped inside the bank. It was going to take a heap of talking to put over this loan to acquire that stallion. But he was grimly set on improving his stock. He didn't want to be just another horse rancher rounding up wild stuff, half breaking it, and selling it for low class working stock the rest of his life. He licked his lips again. He wasn't so good at the jaw-wagging oily-tongue business.

BUT he was saved the trouble. Old Hank Desson, a friend of his dead father's, had gone over to the Junction last night. Wouldn't be back till sometime that afternoon. Ev left, sleeveing the sweat that had sprouted on his forehead despite the cool breeze. He headed down the main drag to *The Golden Bucket Bar*. Torkus usually caught an eye-opener or two there. But the brick-faced lawman

wasn't there. Big Joe the barkeep said the sheriff had dropped down to the Box B to investigate some fence-cutting and butchering.

"Better forget Torkus and keep an eye on Diamond Messing, Ev," Big Joe said. "He's sure beating your time with Miss Lilly."

Ev reddened. The whole town knew he was right fond of Miss Lilly, the daughter of Big Doll who owned the dancehall. He knew Diamond Messing, too, the man who called himself a gambler. But there were rumors that Diamond had more than one game, that he held stakes in something bigger than stud poker.

"Taken her out buggy riding twice this week," put in Paul Wilson who ran the boarding house. "They sure is a picture together."

"Diamond's around ever' day," added Tinnons the harness maker. "You don't git in often, Ev. He's sure staking a strong claim."

Ev's pit-black eyes contracted but he managed a smile. "As for staking a claim, they got to talk to Big Doll first. She don't persuade easy. And—diamonds don't blind her." With that parting shot he left.

Again Ev Blades had sweat on his forehead when he stepped into the street. He looked around. No Hook. He'd show up about the time the wagon was fixed and they were ready to leave, swaying like a sapling in a high wind with a skinful of redevye. Ev smiled at the thought and turned down to the railroad station.

Down at the depot, he parleyed with the agent about the consignment of barbed wire he had coming in. It hadn't gotten there yet, young Pettee, who was the telegrapher as well, said. Might come in on the late afternoon train though. He offered a sack of Durham and they both built tubes.

"Ev, t'aint none of my business. And I never been a—a tale carrier. But was I you, I'd try to git to town more often.

That Diamond jasper sure is buzzing around Miss Lilly a heap. He—"

"Thanks, fella," Ev said curtly. "Hope that wire comes in. Be back later." He went back up the slope, mouth tight. He was tired of hearing about Diamond's wooing. He saw a man turning into a whiskey mill. Something made Ev think of Patch Jones again. . . .

At the barbershop he got a haircut and then walked through the town wearing a black necktie at his throat. Then he went a-calling, trying to think up things to say to her. There was one thing he wanted to say but couldn't yet. Couldn't until he got the horse ranch really paying.

At the other side of town he turned up the side street to the little cottage with the white picket fence. A hollow echo from the inside was the only response. The woman next door stuck her head out the window. Big Doll, she said, had gone down to the Junction yesterday to visit an ailing sister. Wouldn't be back till this evening. Ev walked back to the main line, eyes peeled for sight of Lilly. She was shopping, he supposed.

He liked Big Doll though some of the town turned their noses up. She was rough and raucous in her dancehall, flirting with the customers, singing ballads at the piano. But she had a heart as big as a mountain, had clawed and scratched her way up till she owned the *Palace*. With dynamic energy, she worked into the wee hours of the morning. It was all for Lilly. "She's going to be a lady—and she's going to be somebody," Big Doll would say solemnly.

SUDDENLY Patch Jones flashed into his mind. Jones, the outlaw whom he'd seen at that camp on the short cut coming into town. And then he knew why he thought of Patch Jones so suddenly. His eyes had drifted across the road as he walked. Two men had just stepped out of the eating place there, the screen door flapping behind them. And one was the

surly jasper with the heavy black mustache, the one Patch Jones had called "Nocky" out at the lobo camp.

A toothpick jiggled in his mouth. Then he turned suddenly and re-entered the place. And Ev Blades knew, then, why his thoughts had jerked to Patch Jones that time when he was coming up from the depot, too. It came to him then. At that time, he'd seen Nocky just turning into a whiskey mill on the hill without consciously recalling the incident out at the short-cut.

Ev wished Manny Torkus with that badge he was always sleeve-shining was back in town. Then he shrugged. After all, it was none of his affair. Maybe there were not even any charges against the outlaw. He was opposite the *Palace* again. And something made him hesitate, then turn in up the long steps that ran full across the front of the place.

There were a few customers along the bar that flanked half the length of one side wall. Two men at the little tables hedging the big dance-floor, having a drink with early-risen dancehall girls. Afternoon, as it was then, was early for them. And then Ev Blades saw Lilly. She was at a table, one of the line that ran down parallel to the bar, just about six feet away from it. There was a glass in front of her. And his shoulders in the fancy pearl-gray frock coat back to Ev, leaning across the table to the girl, was Diamond Messing, the flashy gambler.

Ev's face turned as black as the thunder-cloud forerunning a storm. His wide mouth got plasted back hard against his teeth. Miss Lilly should know better. That was strictly against Big Doll's orders. If Doll were in town, the girl never would have dared. He fought for a grip on himself, then went striding down there. So fascinated was she by the gambler and his suave voice, Lilly never even saw Ev Blades nearing.

Diamond, holding her small hand across

the table top, was saying, "—and, honey, I promise you that—" And then Ev was standing over them.

Lilly Hughes looked up, started to smile. She was small, with a Dresden-china look about her. The corn-colored hair fell to her shoulders to form a frame for the little V-shaped face with the oversized brown eyes that always made Ev's pulse jump a notch or two. She started to smile, open her soft naturally-red lips to speak. Then she jerked her hand away from the stem of the wine glass, recoiled against the chair back. There was something on Evan Blades' face, something deep in his eyes she had never seen before.

Ev said stiffly, "Put down that drink and go home, Lilly Hughes."

Diamond Messing, smiling with a certain tolerant air, sort of glided up from the chair. He was slim, narrow shouldered, inches taller than the young horse rancher. Narrow-headed with sleek black hair. Oily eyes. Clean-shaven—and always shaven. Garbed in pearly gray with a fancy white shirt with a stock and a diamond stick-pin stuck in it. It was from that he got his name though it was the only diamond he wore. Some folks said it looked suspiciously like glass. Men called him snaky-looking. Women often were fascinated by him, especially by that silky-smooth voice.

"Now see here—uh—mister," he opened up unhurriedly, smiling down at Ev.

Ev didn't even favor him with a look. He spoke to Lilly again. "Go home at once, Miss Lilly," he got out, voice harsher with strain now. "Do you want to break Doll's heart?"

She rose quickly, grabbing up a wisp of handkerchief from her lap, face lowered. The reference to Big Doll had struck home. She nodded, eyes still downward to Diamond the gambler.

"Mr. Messing...." Her eyes twisted to flash angrily at Ev Blades for a second.

Then she stepped quickly around him and strode out to the big double doors, head high, through them and to the street, heels making irate clicks on the wooden steps.

Diamond's eyes were sliding around so that the whites showed. He grabbed Ev's arm as his head thrust out on his long neck. "Who do you think you are, you two-bit horse-nurse? What do you mean by sending Miss Lilly away when she is with me? Why I—"

Ev Blades' bright black eyes bit into the gambler like gimlets. "Get your damn hand off me, Diamond—pronto!"

Diamond made a kind of smile, upper lip curling back. Sniffed as if chuckling inside. Then he dropped his hand lazily from Ev Blades' arm, picked up his drink, sipped some. Spoke without lifting his eyes from it. "Gophers like you want to be careful, horse nurse, about who they git tough with. Might tangle with the wrong gent some day and—"

He broke off, blinking. For Ev had turned his back and was striding out. Diamond's hand strayed to the double-barrelled derringer in a vest pocket. "The danged fool, I could kill him easy," he whispered. He was awed.

BACK at the bank a little before closing time, Ev found Hank Desson still hadn't returned. They'd had a telegram from him. He'd arrive from Junction City first thing in the morning. On the bank steps, Ev made his decision. He'd have to stay in town overnight. Then he saw Hook weaving down the line, chuckling away as he always did when he had a skinful of rye.

Ev got him by the arm and steered him down to the eating place as the purple dusk softened the harsh outlines of the cowtown. He put Hook and his guffaws in a chair at a table tucked into a back corner. Their grub came and Hook stopped chuckling as he piled in. Up front three cowmen were laughing and

talking loudly. They finished and left, leaving the place much quieter. Then Ev heard the murmur of low voices. They began to rise a little as if in argument. And then the voices on the other side of a thin partition flared, grew louder, more heated, abruptly.

"Don't threaten me, I tell you!" one voice said angrily. "I don't take orders from any lunkhead of a trigger slammer!" That voice was the oily smooth one of Diamond Messing. Ev recognized it at once.

There was a mumbled curse from the other man in there. He was evidently trying to hold his temper. "Mr. Messing, them's Patch's orders, not mine. Mebbe so you'd like to come out to the camp and argue it out with him in person, huh?" There was a taunting note there. Then the voice went surly again. "I'm just telling you what Patch Jones said for me to tell. And Patch is one danged impatient critter when he gits riled, Mr. Messing."

There was a pause. Diamond Messing came back, finally, with less heat, "Well, I tell you, I got some business to 'tend to tonight. Personal business. He'll have to wait another day, that's all."

"If I give him that message, I'm warning you, he'll hit saddle leather and bust in here and look you up," the other said. And then Ev Blades, on the outside of the partition recognized Nocky's voice.

"But I got this personal business—"

A chair scraped back. It was Nocky rising as he cut in bluntly on the gambler. "The hell with your 'personal business'! Patch wants the payoff. He's got a bellyful of waiting. So've all of us. We been risking our necks running them guns 'cross the Rio into Mexico and—"

"Now, don't get excited. I—"

"Stop blatting! Patch wants the payoff, the dinero. He wants his split. Our split! Sabe? You say the gents behind you are in Junction. Awright. Patch says he'll be in Hobe Bluffs early tomorrow,

At the old hotel there. Bring them other gents down there—or come with the pay-off. He don't care which just so long as he gits his share of the dinero."

Diamond's voice was small when he answered. "I got this personal business. But mebbe I can hook the two things up. I'll try to be and—"

Nocky's boot heels were rattling toward the curtained doorway. He paused a moment to say, as if he didn't hear Diamond, "And I wouldn't try no tricks was I you, Messing! Patch is a bad man to have on your back-trail when he's got a mad on."

Nocky came through the curtain and strode for the door, never seeing Ev Blades bent low over the little corner table. From the room behind the partition, Diamond called to Charlie for more coffee. Ev and Hook went quietly out into the night. At Wilson's boarding house, they got a room and Hook turned in at once after shedding his boots. But Ev was restless. In *The Golden Bucket*, he had a glass of beer, listened to the gossip around him. Torkus, the sheriff, hadn't returned to town yet, he learned.

He left there and dropped around to Big Doll's *Palace* where the three-piece orchestra was jangling. Big Doll was back. She saw him, came over and gripped him by the shoulders, and shook him a little. She was a big buxom woman with high-piled, brassy-hued hair, a raucous voice, the large generous-lipped mouth always ready to smile and give with her "Howdy, chunkhead," greeting. She liked Ev Blades even though he didn't have money.

"Ev, you sad-faced galoot, why aren't you around sparking Lilly?" she greeted him. "She's sitting up at the house mooning like a lost doggie. Keeps going up to her room and staring at her hope chest. She—"

"Mebbe I'll drop around in a little while," Ev said evasively. Doll left him to go out on the floor and introduce a new

girl to the crowd which was pouring in.

EV LEFT there, uneasy, depressed. He went down to the lane where the Hughes cottage was, then decided Lilly wouldn't want to see him today. He'd call on her in the morning after he'd had his talk with Hank Desson at the bank. She'd have cooled down by then. He went back to Wilson's and turned in. On the other bed, Hook was snoring like a sawmill in full blast.

But though they'd left the horse ranch up behind the Gunshot Hills at two that morning, Ev could only doze in fits and starts. So he roused quickly when he heard the footsteps on the stairs and Big Doll breathlessly calling his name. Pulling on a pair of pants, he opened the door. Doll looked like a ghost, her face so ashen the rouge stood out on her cheeks like patches of blood. She was haggard, gaunt. Something told him it was about Lilly.

"Lilly, she—she's gone." And Doll shoved a piece of letter paper at Ev with palsied hand. He got a sinking sensation as he read:

Mama dear. . . . I'm going away with William Messing. We'll be married in Junction. I love him. I will write you tomorrow from there. Please forgive me. . . .

Lilly

"She's got to be stopped," cried Doll. "That Diamond's got snake blood in him. She's got to be stopped!"

West from Swellfork in the night rode Ev Blades, along the stage trail that led to Junction City. But he wasn't going all the way to Junction because he knew Diamond Messing had no intention of taking Miss Lilly there. He remembered what he'd heard through the partition at Charlie's—how Diamond had said maybe he could "hook up" his personal business—this eloping with Lilly—with the business of meeting Patch Jones at Hobe Bluffs. Ev was going to Hobe Bluffs.

It was a cowtown, smaller than Junction, and to the southeast of it. Years ago, it had been Junction's rival, a bustling growing town in the heart of lush range country. And then a river to the south of it had gone dry, turning the country into a wasteland. Cow outfits had gone bust or shifted to fresh range. And since then Hobe Bluffs had been slowly dying like something shriveling on the vine. Patch Jones wouldn't be bothered in that somnolent hole. A few miles further on, Ev turned into the side road that angled off through a narrow canyon to the southeast. It was about midday when he followed the alkali strip of trail around a bare hill and rode into sleepy Hobe Bluffs. The bluffs were off to the east, reddish and towering where one side of the broad valley bottlenecked.

There were only a handful of people scattered along the wooden sidewalks. Vacant abandoned cabins and houses stood rotting away with glassless windows and sagging roofs. Many stores were boarded up. A stray dog slept in the entrance of a big old barroom with broken-down front doors. Then Ev saw the sign spiking out from a paint-peeling three-story structure. The sign said, "Bluffs House." Hitching the cayuse to the sagging rail, he loosened the Colts in his single holster, wished he had a second weapon, then went up onto the sagging porch and into the musty-smelling place.

Nobody was in the old lobby with its pot-bellied Congress stove and ancient battered furniture. Nobody behind the counter at the rear of it either. Ev Blades hesitated a moment. Then he took the wide staircase over to the left. He figured he'd just have to knock on each door on both upper floors till he found Lilly. And Diamond wouldn't let her be taken away from him easily this time. As he neared the top, Ev wondered if they were already married. The thought made him feel as if his heart had turned into a cold rock.

He wouldn't have to worry about the third floor, he saw. There was a rope across the bottom of the stair flight there. He got into the dim hallway of the second floor. And there was the muffled spat of a gun from a room down to the left. Two men down at that end of the hall materialized out of the shadows. One of them thrust open the door. And Nocky's surly voice issued from the other side of it.

"Don't try to sneak another derringer out, Diamond," he warned. "Could uh got you that time."

"Next time, if Nocky don't, I will!" another voice said.

Ev guessed that was Patch Jones himself. Evidently the payoff had already been made. And there'd been some kind of a disagreement. Then men started to back from the room. Ev had already taken a couple of steps down the hall. He cut his eyes around. On his right, the door of a dark room stood open. Ev jumped into it. It was empty. Pulling off his sombrero, he peeped out.

PATCH JONES, with Nocky at his elbow had just backed from Diamond's room. He gestured with his gun carelessly toward the unseen Diamond inside. "Them's my orders. Tell the little lady you and her are travelling along with us fer a spell. She catches my eye. Bring her out inside uh ten minutes. And don't try to slip away, Diamond. I got two men out back now. And we'll have the place ringed. Sabe?"

A door behind him, across the hall from Diamond's room, shot open. Peering from his hiding place, Ev Blades saw Lilly appear, standing very straight, little chin thrust up defiantly. "Don't wait for me," she snapped. "I'm going back to Swellfork—back home. I hate all of you!" Her eyes shifted to Diamond inside the other door. "You're all outlaws!"

Jones chuckled, and turned toward her. "We're going to git better acquainted,

miss." He came down the hall with a long unhurried stride, his four men following him. "Ten minutes, Diamond, or I'll come in and give you the gun-whipping of your life," he called over a shoulder as he turned at the head of the stairs. None of them had noticed Ev Blades who'd faded back into the dark room. He heard their spur chains clicking across the floor of the lobby below and stepped from the room.

Down at the end of the hall, mopping sweat from his narrow face with a silk bandanna, Diamond sagged against the door frame. And then Miss Lilly emerged from her room. When she saw Ev, she took a backward step as if confronted by a spectre. When he nodded, lifting his sombrero, she broke into a half-unbelieving wide smile of relief.

"Ev! Ev! You're here... I—"

But Ev Blades paid her no further heed. He turned to Diamond who now stood straight, trying to pull himself together. "I heard the end of it. What're you going to do?"

The gambler-outlaw plucked at his lower lip nervously. "I—I don't know. They're six of 'em—and Patch himself. And—" he indicated Lilly with a jerk of his sleek head. He meant it would be hard to bust through with a woman in tow.

Ev was thinking fast. "Did the payoff come through?"

Diamond Messing was too scared to wonder how Ev knew about that. He nodded. With jerked-out words, he said he'd sent a messenger with a note early last night from Swellfork to the backers of the gun-running ring in Junction. This morning, when they hit Hobe Bluffs an hour or so ago, one of them had been waiting for him with the payoff dinero.

"All right," Ev told him brusquely. "You gotta buy Patch off, Diamond! Give him your share of that payoff to let you go."

Mouth twisting in fury, Diamond started to curse, then caught himself in the

presence of the girl. "Patch took my share too. He said it was for safe-keeping...." Sweat from his forehead dropped and let dark dots on that gray frock coat. "Patch, he—he'll be back if we don't go out."

Ev discovered Lilly was standing beside him, not beside Diamond. He thought about barricading themselves in a room. But there again she would be under fire when they stormed it, would be in danger of being hit by some stray ricocheting shot. He looked down at her sternly, sternly because he had to cover up his own feelings.

Her hand brushed his. "I want to go home, Ev."

He made a mock smile. "It'd be a nice place for all of us to be right now.... You get married to him yet?"

She nodded her head in a tiny jerk. "Yes," came from her throat drily. The local preacher had performed the ceremony when Diamond had finished his dealings with the man from Junction. Before she'd known what Diamond's game was. Then, almost at once, Patch Jones had appeared.

NOCKY'S ill-natured voice rose from the lobby. "Them ten minutes is almost up, Diamond. And Patch is gitting plumb ornery. Better grab your skypiece and bring the filly out. Or you want us to come up?"

Diamond stood with jaw sagging. Ev called down in a muffled voice, "A woman needs time to pack her things, tell Patch."

Nocky yelled back up the stairs. "Patch ain't particular about clothes. Though he does fancy that frock coat you got, Diamond." A laugh followed the words. Then he could be heard going out.

And it gave Ev Blades his idea. The gray frock coat. He saw the pearl-gray sombrero behind Diamond on the dresser in the room. When he asked, Diamond said their ponies were in the shed back of the hotel. Ev remembered the lane that

ran up past the side of the hotel. If he could get out there and....

"Peel outa that coat," he ordered the gambler. Diamond looked puzzled, then started to draw himself up. Ev repeated the order. "You wanta git outa here alive, don't you? And I want Miss Lilly to git away safe."

"Well, sure—" Diamond began.

"Then give me your coat and Stetson, fool!" Ev snapped in a whisper. "I'll get out one of those side windows downstairs and draw 'em off—specially those two in the rear. Then you and Miss Lilly can make a break for it—for your ponies."

Diamond was already slicking out of that coat. He looked like a man from whose neck a halter had just been removed. But Lilly grabbed Ev's arm.

"No! I won't let you do it," she cried. "No. You—"

Ev thrust her away brusquely as he struggled into the coat. It was a skin-tight fit. Diamond passed him the sombrero. Ev asked him if he had an extra gun. Diamond went to a satchel on his bed and produced a .45 with a silver-inlaid butt. Lilly, sobbing drily, started to protest again.

"Not so much noise, woman," the horse rancher told her shortly. "Want to tip them off outside?"

"But you'll get killed," she gasped out.

He took her by the shoulders and faced her, wearing the gray frock coat and the gray hat. "I promised Doll I'd get you back home. Promise me this—if you get away—you'll go back home. Will you, Lilly? Take him with you—but go back."

"I promise, Ev." Then she stood on tiptoe and kissed him, quickly but hard. She clung to him. "I can't let you do it, Ev. I—"

He thrust her away, thumbed at Diamond. "Somebody's got to risk it. Will your husband do it?" He sneered as Diamond sucked in his lips and backed into his doorway as if about to be attacked.

Ev turned on his heel and went down the hall. At the bottom of the stairs he moved around in the dimness beside the staircase. Out in the sun glare of the street he could see Nocky and another of the bunch. Patch called to them and they both turned to look toward him. Ev flung himself past the counter and across the lobby, past the bearded old-timer who snoozed in one of the chairs. The side windows looking onto the lane were old-fashioned, from the ceiling to the floor. One of them was open. He jumped up on the run, put one boot on the sill, and leaped out to land on his feet.

None of Patch Jones' men were around on that side. They took it for granted Diamond and the girl would come by either the front or back way. He wasn't seen for a moment. He knew he could shed that gray coat and walk out a free man and safe. Patch Jones wouldn't be interested in him at all. The temptation was great. Then he thrust himself out from the side of the building and turned down the lane.

THERE were two watching the rear, standing against the side of the horseshed so they could cover the back door. The shorter one spotted him. He saw the pearl-gray frock coat, the sombrero of the same shade. In the eye-searing sun glare, it was practically impossible to distinguish features at any distance.

"There he is—Diamond!" shouted the man. His drawn gun swung up and crackled.

Ev pulled up short and sent a bullet into the side of the horseshed. The battle was on.

The taller one was racing through the high grass straight out toward the side road to cut off Ev's flight that way. The short one darted forward, closer, behind a tree. He fired again. One slug seemed to drone right under Ev's very ear. Crouching, he sent a return bullet that

gashed bark from the tree and made the gunman pull in his ears. And then those in the front road were swinging to the corner of the lane.

Ev half wheeled and fired as Nocky rode the trigger. The black-mustached man staggered sideward, hit in the flesh of the leg. Ev turned to his left and dashed across the lane and in between a saddle maker's store and a cabin. He had picked the spot during that moment after he jumped out the window. Whipping Diamond's gun with the fancy butt from his waistband, he clipped the dirt beside the tall gent coming from the other direction in the lane. The long jasper dived for the grass over to the side. Ev sent a slug at the men coming into the lane from the main line. One of them, now, was tow-headed big Patch Jones himself. The man beside him pitched to the ground, hitting on his face.

Ev's stomach turned over. He'd never killed a man before. And he was pretty sure he'd handed that gunslick a ticket to Boothill. Patch was yelling orders. A bullet chunked wood off the corner of the saddle maker's place just above Ev's head. And he began to retreat down the narrow space between the two places before they surrounded and trapped him.

"He's running!" the short man behind the tree in the hotel yard hollered.

Ev got to the back end of the cabin, slid around it, and hurriedly slipped shells from his belt into the chambers of his own hot gun. Then he peered around the corner. Two-three of them were headed for that alley on the dead run. The young horse rancher was strangely cool, now, for an hombre who'd about as good as signed his own death warrant. He thought he caught the drumfire sound of pony hoofs from beyond the hotel. Then he snapped lead up the alley. And the first man, about to step in between the two buildings, let out a roar of pain and hobbled back out of there.

Nobody else tried to come down between the house and the store. Patch was shouting orders again. Ev knew what was going to happen. They would go down the other side of the cabin and the store to try to trap him in a pinchers. They still didn't realize he wasn't Diamond, the gambler. He took a tremendous gamble then. No sense in retreating, in running across backyards, trying to hole up. They'd get him sooner or later. His one chance was to get to a horse. So he started to work back up the alley.

He saw nobody out front as he advanced. A few more yards and he had a view of the open side of the hotel horse-shed. There were only two ponies there where there had been four before. Lilly and Diamond had gotten away.

He got to the front of the alley, at the corner of the porch of the cabin. There didn't seem to be anybody around. From the rear came a shout. Ev leaped out, and made his bid to get across the lane and to that shed.

"Look out, Blades!" It was Diamond who'd risen out of the high grass in the hotel backyard, so ashen he was greenish, voice quaking. He had come back. It seemed incredible.

BUT there was no time to think about it then. Ev half whirled to his right. Patch Jones and two men had emerged from the other side of the cabin. Guns ripped out lead in their harsh staccato chant. A bullet ripped through the side of the calf of Ev's leg. It knocked him to a knee. He worked the triggers of both guns. And he knew Diamond was firing too.

It was all terribly swift with the inexorable grimness of a showdown where men are dealing in death. A man beside Jones half twisted, dropping his weapon as he grabbed at his shooting arm. But another one came running from the rear. Then there was a terrible scream from

Diamond. He came stumbling out of the grass, head down and wobbling loosely, a great crimson blossom on his white shirt front. He went down flat in the lane, chest blown apart, dead before he hit. And a split second later, Ev Blades got the wild-eyed Patch Jones in the middle.

The outlaw chief doubled over. He took a few lunging steps, then sat down heavily, face distorted with pain, a doomed man. The two behind him jumped back to the cover of the end of the cabin porch. The gunning stopped.

Half hobbling, Ev worked to the other side of the lane, guns levelled, watching them. He began to back toward the shed. They watched him but no shot came. Nor did they close in, attempt to follow him. An hombre who could drop the boss was too wire-tough for them to buck. He got to the shed, got the cayuse unhitched. Fortunately the animal was still saddled up. He swung it outside, sent one shot their way for Luck, then led it to the far side of the shed and dragged himself into the saddle.

He drove the cayuse up the hill behind the hotel, amongst the saplings and scrub growth, following a narrow path on which he could see the fresh-cut hoofprints of Lilly's and Diamond's ponies. She came bolting out from the trees on one side where she'd been watching the gunfight in the lane.

"Come on!" he yelled. "They got Diamond—your husband."

They threw the spur steel to their ponies, reached the top of the little hill and dropped into the hollow beyond. Half a

mile on, Ev led the way over to the trail out of Hobe Bluffs. They reined up a moment. But there was no sound of pursuit. With their leader out of the picture, the Patch Jones bunch were finished.

"I—I'm sorry about Diamond," Ev said. "He had nerve to come back and side me."

"I made him," said Lilly in a small but steady voice. Up on the hillside, she'd grabbed a derringer from his vest pocket and threatened to shoot him if he didn't go back. "I told him, too, I'd shoot him if he returned to me without—you." She sat, head bowed, nervously rubbing the saddle horn. "When I discovered, down here, what he was, I realized I never really—loved him. I—I was going home alone." She lifted her eyes shyly to Ev Blades.

"We gotta keep riding," he said gruffly. They pushed on at a hand lope. He could feel the slow drip of blood from the flesh wound inside his pant leg. A few more miles between them and Hobe and he'd stop and knot a bandanna over it. He looked over at her.

She met his stare squarely. "I was a fool, Ev. I know."

He wetted his lips. Then, for the first time, he was able to say to her what was in his mind. "Look here. I don't want the woman I'm going to marry going around with tin horns and two-bits! Sabe? I'm very particular about my horses—and the woman who's going to be my wife! Sabe?"

Lilly bowed her head. "Yes, Ev," she said docilely. Then she flashed him a sideways smile. "But it took you a long time to get around to speaking your piece . . ."

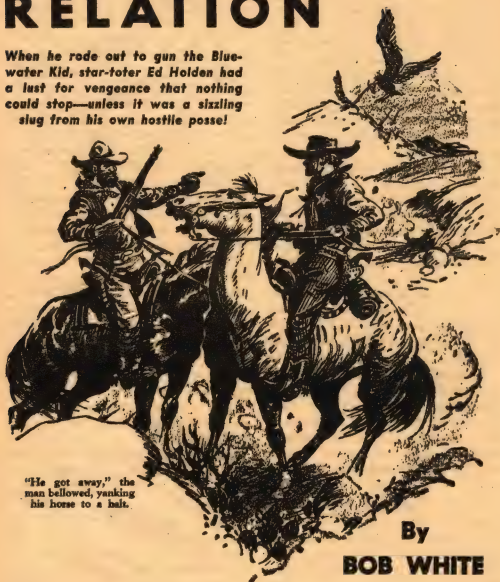
PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Though the West was chock full of thieves—rustlers, train and stage robbers, hold-up men and specialists in ransacking banks and express offices—housebreakers were rare. There was a strong unwritten code in the West which virtually guaranteed that saddles, weapons or clothing left unguarded anywhere on the trail would be as safe from theft as a case of measles.

—J. W. Q.

SATAN'S RELATION

When he rode out to gun the Bluewater Kid, star-toter Ed Holden had a lust for vengeance that nothing could stop—unless it was a sizzling slug from his own hostile posse!



"He got away," the man bellowed, yanking his horse to a halt.

By

BOB WHITE

SHERIFF ED HOLDEN waited restlessly, hidden by a small mound of rocks. There had been no answer to his fire for some time and every desire urged him to charge forward. Only cold common sense restrained him. The outlaw was cornered; every exit was blocked

by a sixgun. If the Bluewater Kid wasn't already dead, he would be as soon as he made a break for it. The sheriff was out for blood.

To Ed Holden, lawkeeping was more than a profession; it was a passion. He had an uncompromising hatred for crime

that dated back to when his parents had been slaughtered by a wild border mob. Ed expected every law abiding man to share his lust for vengeance.

The shadows began to lengthen and the sheriff stirred his legs to keep them from getting numb. He wondered about the other four men who helped surround the dozen acres of boulders into which the Bluewater Kid had been chased. Each held a key position and to one of them would fall the task of shooting it out with the bandit. The sheriff grimly prayed that the opportunity would be his. The dead cashier of the looted Lead City bank meant little to him personally, but the town was aroused to fever pitch by the outrage, and that mattered a great deal. These people voted him into the job that was his life.

Ed held no illusions about his popularity. He was disliked for his bluntness and feared for the cold, impersonal manner in which he exercised his power. But he was efficient. During his heavy handed rein lawlessness had disappeared from Lead City, and for that reason Ed Holden was tolerated. But one serious failure, like allowing the Bluewater Kid to escape, could well put him out of office. This was a fate the sheriff didn't like to consider.

A volley of shots split the air, followed by loud and unrestrained swearing. Ed leaped to his feet as a giant of a man on a frightened pony charged around a boulder.

"He got away," the man bellowed, yanking his horse to a halt. "Some damn stupid fool let him get away. Come on! Let's ride!"

Ed eyed the huge, black-bearded rider with a sinking heart, then he raced to his own mount and leaping on, raked it with his spurs. Together the two thundered in a wide circle to the west. When they had cleared the forest of rock and reached the top of a hill they saw a tiny figure disappearing into a distant canyon.

Ed made an instant decision. "Let him go," he yelled at Mike.

The big man's face sagged in amazement, then became stormy with anger. "You mean to let him get away?" He kneed his horse. "Like hell! I'm going after him."

"You move in that direction and I'll gun you down," the sheriff ground out. "I'm giving orders. We go back to the others."

Mike hesitated, his thick mouth working. There was hatred in the black look which he gave the sheriff. "You're running the show," he finally conceded, but there was no sign of submission in his voice.

They found the other three men several miles behind. Two were standing, Marquette the gambler, and Les Harper, a quiet young cowman who had come into Lead City less than a year ago. The third man, Danny Leroy, sat on the ground, one hand pressing a soiled bandana to his bleeding shoulder. Danny, still in his teens, was a teller at the robbed bank and had been an assistant to the dead man. His childish face was now drawn and pale. He looked like he was about to be very sick.

"So he got away," the gambler observed. "I was sure counting on a share of that reward."

"To hell with the money," the sheriff cut him short. "Who let him past?"

"That's what we been discussing," Marquette replied calmly. His darkly handsome face contained a suggestion of mockery. "Maybe you can tell us."

Ed Holden turned slowly to the gambler. Marquette puzzled him. Here was one man who showed neither fear nor respect nor even dislike toward the sheriff. This was sufficiently unusual to set him in a class apart.

Before Ed could speak, Mike sounded off bitterly. "I think it looks funny. There wasn't no call to stop chasing that outlaw just cause he got a little distance on us."

Ed got off his horse and looked up at

Mike. "I don't like what you're suggesting. Maybe you want to change your mind?"

"I think it looks damn funny," the giant repeated, his voice heavy.

The sheriff thrust out his jaw. "Get down off that pony," he challenged.

THE big man leaped lightly to the ground and Ed went at him. Mike was much the heavier and there was a great strength in his thick shoulders. On the other hand, the sheriff was quicker on his feet and had the longer reach. Ed got in the first blow, a raking left that caught Mike off balance and sliced a cut beneath his eye.

Mike let out a roar, and lowering his head, charged at his opponent. This was a fatal mistake and just what the lawman had counted on. Ed stayed just out of reach and hammered uppercuts savagely into the lowered and unprotected face. It was only a matter of minutes before the big man stumbled to the ground, his face battered and bleeding. He stared up at Ed through swollen eyes, one hand resting on his gun butt.

"Go on," the sheriff panted. "Draw."

The hand slid away and Mike worked himself to a sitting position. For the present all fight had gone from him.

Ed faced the other three, his eyes wide. His arms hung limply at his sides, fists still clenched. "Any one else maybe got something to say?"

Marquette shrugged lightly and Les looked down at his boots. The frail Danny began to look sicker.

The sheriff studied them contemptuously, his blue eyes cold and brittle. "One of you ain't got the guts of a baby calf." He paused and a note of bitterness crept into his voice. "Either that or one of you is as much a snake as that Bluewater Kid." The smile which twisted his thin lips was grim. "When I find out which one of you it was I'm going to settle things

personally, my own way. Just like I aim to settle things with that bandit that got away."

He picked up his hat and crammed it on his head. "I'd gun down my own brother if he was on the other side of the law, and damn you, don't none of you forget it."

The sheriff climbed back on his horse. "We're going after him. At sunup. There's no sense in trying to trail a man over this rock at night. Ain't a one of you free of suspicion either and if you don't show up in the morning I'll be coming after you." He looked down at the sick bank clerk. "That goes for you too. Wrap up that shoulder and you'll do to ride along."

"The hold-up gent will have quite a start by morning," Les observed, speaking for the first time.

"He's got to sleep," the sheriff reminded him sharply. "And we'll be carrying food and water. The direction he's heading, he'll get mighty hungry after a few days. Ain't nothing ahead but more broken country and it's dry as dust."

Les shrugged and helped the wounded youngster onto his horse. Then the posse began to ride slow back to Lead City. Mike rode by himself, his head lowered.

At the outskirts of town, the sheriff turned off and Les did the same. Ed looked at him questioningly.

"Nora asked me over for supper," Les began. He seemed undecided. "Maybe you better tell her I can't make it."

Ed's face showed his annoyance. His sister Nora was the one weak spot in his make-up. He adored her completely and anything she did was all right, up to a certain point. He knew she had been seeing this young cowpoke and he hadn't objected so long as it didn't reach a serious level. Now he wasn't sure, and his annoyance was chiefly at that fact. He was in no mood to consider it properly with his mind occupied with the escape of the Bluewater Kid.

"Well," he replied gruffly, "you better come along or she'll be mad."

AS THEY rode along the sheriff studied the cowman from the corner of his eye. He had never really noticed Les before. Ed couldn't see much that would attract a sensible, pretty girl like his sister. There was nothing to make him stand out from a thousand other cowboys, unless it was the sharpness of his features. Right now the setting sun threw his profile into bold relief so that it appeared hewn with a hatchet. Ed frowned to himself. From somewhere in his memory the face struck a discordant note. Had he seen this man before somewhere?

Nora was standing in the kitchen door, watching, as they rode into the yard and dismounted.

"Les says you asked him over for supper," Ed said, stepping by her into the kitchen.

"Yes, I did," she replied with a cool laugh. "But after the way he left me last night at the Watkins, I wasn't sure if I could count on him."

"I explained that to you," Les put in. There was a note of pleading in his voice. "I just had to talk to that fellow when he came after me."

"It must have been mighty important," she replied aloofly. She turned to her brother who was getting a drink from the bucket. "Did you capture that man who murdered poor Charley Barnes at the bank this morning? Some of the people are even talking of getting up a vigilante committee. It was a terrible thing."

"No," Ed answered somberly. "Someone let him get away. It might even have been Les here."

The cowman paled and glanced at Nora.

"Don't be rude," Nora reprimanded him. "That's not a matter to joke about."

Ed hadn't been joking, but he didn't say so. Les had his back turned while he washed carefully at the sink in the corner

and the sheriff watched his sister put the food on the table. There was little similarity between him and his sister. She was as small and dainty as he was large and course. Where his hair was blond and unruly, hers was black and as fine as silk; his face was square, hers round and soft. That the two were even related proved a constant source of perplexity to the townspeople who had taken Nora to their hearts with the same enthusiasm with which they had rejected Ed.

"Who was this man that was more important than me?" Nora asked Les as he dried his hands on a laundered flour sack.

"Just a friend," Les answered quickly. A little too quickly, the sheriff thought. "I guess I shouldn't have stayed tonight, since we'll be leaving so early in the morning."

Nora raised her eyebrows questioning-ly and Ed told her the important bits of what had taken place. She listened with a calmness bred by living with the dangerous sheriff. Nothing disturbed the serenity of the supper table; that was a point she insisted upon.

When Les took his leave it was quite dark and Nora followed him into the yard. Ed waited a little while for his sister to return, and when she didn't he went to bed. Tomorrow would be a long day and he would need the rest. And anyway Nora was old enough to know her own mind. However he might feel about Les not being good enough for her, there was nothing he could do or say that would change her mind.

He lay awake thinking of the Bluewater Kid and how he'd hit the bank at just the right moment. How did he know a gold shipment had arrived when the news was secret and confined to the bank officials alone? Immediately after the robbery, Ed had gathered up the only men in sight and had taken swift pursuit. So swift that the bandit had been forced to hole up in that patch of badlands.

There they'd had him securely blocked and without help from one of the posse he never would have escaped. Young Danny had been the only casualty. Ed suddenly sat upright in bed. Danny knew of the gold shipment.

The sheriff pondered. Should he go now and question the bank clerk? His sister's room adjoined his, separated only by a thin partition, and he heard her enter while he was trying to decide. Finally he lay back down. No use disturbing her when he could have it out with the boy in the morning. He was to regret this decision.

He was almost asleep when he became aware of a muffled sobbing. He listened intently. Nora was crying. That it had something to do with Les Harper, Ed was sure and in that moment he hated the cowman enough to do murder. He lay awake long after the sobbing had ceased.

Ed awoke long before dawn. While he dressed he heard his sister moving about in the kitchen and he wondered why she had gotten up so early. She usually slept late when the sheriff went out on one of his very early jaunts. He took his silver guns from a peg on the wall and admired their beauty before dropping them into their holsters. It made him feel good to feel their weight tugging at his waist.

HIS sister turned as he entered the kitchen and he saw that she looked haggard and tired as if she hadn't slept well. She avoided his eyes and poured a cup of steaming coffee and set it at his place.

"I could have gotten this myself," he objected awkwardly, yet pleased that she had gotten breakfast for him. He wolfed the bacon and eggs and gulped the coffee hurriedly, anxious to be gone.

When he had finished he got to his feet and grabbed his hat. "I may be gone two or three days. Can't tell. Take care of

yourself. I'll return as soon as possible."

"I'll be all right," she answered quietly. "I put some extra food and water in your saddle bags." She looked at him squarely for the first time, then ran forward and buried her face in his chest. She wasn't crying, but he could feel her thin body quiver convulsively and he tried to comfort her, not quite sure what was wrong.

"It's Les," he heard her say in a muffled voice.

"What's wrong?" he asked, a little angrily. "He'll be all right. He ain't no child."

"I love him," she blurted out, burying her head deeper. He could hear the sobbing now.

"You mean you're carrying on about a little thing like that?" He pushed her away roughly. He had no right to be, but he was jealous and he knew it. He expected she would marry some day, but he always hoped for more of a man than Les Harper appeared to be. "I got to go," he told her, putting on his hat and striding toward the door.

"Wait Ed. Wait just a minute."

Ed paused at the door and looked back. He softened at the stark misery in her eyes. The only person in the world that mattered to him, it was hard to refuse her anything. "I got no objections to Les, if that's what's bothering you."

"It's not just that," she replied, her lips trembling. "Les is—please don't do anything too quick, without thinking it over first. I mean—" she fought for control of her emotions. "Just remember I love him, Ed." With that she turned quickly and ran toward her room. Ed watched her with surprise, then shaking his head he walked out the door.

Once outside in the cold air he forgot Nora and his mind turned to Danny LeRoy. It seemed absolutely impossible that Danny was in cahoots with the Bluewater Kid. The youngster just didn't fit into

the role. You couldn't always tell though. It had to be looked into.

He saddled his pony and set off for town. At his office he found Marquette, Les and Mike ready and waiting. Danny hadn't shown up.

"You wait here," he told them. "I'm going after Leroy. He rode on down to the rooming house where Danny lived. There was no light in Danny's room and Ed rattled the door loudly. He waited, then tried again. There was no sound from within. Maybe the kid had lit out during the night. The sheriff tried the door and found it unlocked. He pushed inside cautiously, then struck a match. Danny was still in bed and Ed lighted the lamp on the dresser.

Then he returned to the bed. One short glance told him that whatever Danny might have known was now sealed forever. The bank clerk was staring glassily at the ceiling, a great gaping hole far up on his forehead. Ed looked down at him a moment, then gently pulled a blanket over the body.

There were two cups on the table, both with coffee still in the bottom. This was no stranger that had killed Danny, more likely someone Danny knew well and trusted. Could the Bluewater Kid have back-trailed and murdered Danny to silence him? The sheriff didn't think so. What could Danny have to say that would put the bandit in deeper? It seemed more logical that Danny either knew or guessed who had given the Bluewater Kid information about the gold shipment.

Ed sighed. Danny's death at least narrowed the field of suspects down to three, Les, Mike or Marquette. But if the people of Lead City had been angry over the murder of old Charley Barnes, they'd really be wild when they found the body of young Danny Leroy. A cold anger swept over the sheriff. He blew out the lamp and went outside, determined to say nothing to the other three about this yet.

"What's held him up?" Marquette asked.

"He ain't in shape for a long ride," the sheriff replied carefully. "I want something out of my office, then we'll hit the trail." He dismounted and unlocked his door. Inside, he closed the door and lit a lamp. Then he dug into his desk for the pile of old posters he kept there.

Near the bottom he found what he wanted. A yellowed leaflet describing the Bluewater Kid and a rough sketch of the outlaw. Ed studied the drawing carefully. This was the thing that had been bothering him. Except for a long scar which ran from the eye to a corner of the chin, this picture might be of Les Harper.

THE sheriff smiled grimly and shoved the bill into his shirt pocket. He began to remember things, the conversation between his sister and Les and the man who had taken him away from the Watkins, Nora's strange behavior and strange request. She must have known. Ed loosened his guns, feeling their smooth grip against his moist palms. His own sister in love with the brother of a murderer, and worse, maybe Les was a murderer too.

Ed drummed the top of his desk with his fingertips. Why not settle it now, have it out and over with? There was no doubt in his mind that Les had let his brother escape. That made him no better than an outlaw himself. He wasn't even entitled to an even break. The sheriff had gunned down other outlaws without warning and had felt no remorse. But there was the matter of Nora. Don't do anything too quick without thinking it over, she had begged him.

He blew out the light and slipped outside. At least this time he would be prepared and he'd actually promised his sister nothing.

For a long time no one spoke as they rode toward the bleak barren hills. Ed

glanced at Les from time to time but his face was without expression. There was nothing to indicate what must be taking place in his mind.

Mike was sullenly quiet. One eye was swollen and blue and his lips were badly cut. Ed knew that he had lost any friendliness the big man might have had for him before the fight. It came to the sheriff with a shocking suddenness that in a showdown there would be no one but perhaps the gambler to side in with him, and Marquette was in it strictly for the reward money.

Ed Holden was a man of action. He liked to meet his opposition with flying fists or flaming guns. He found a sort of pleasure in stalking down the Bluewater Kid because here the issue was square-cut and clear. It was man against man with no quarter given. He would have preferred to put his standing with Les Harper on the same basis, call his hand, accuse him bluntly of helping the Bluewater Kid escape and of murdering Danny Leroy. As it was, he was forced by an unmade promise to let Les make the first move, to prove his guilt. It was an unusual experience for the sheriff and one which made him uneasy.

His quarrel with big Mike was much the same. The baleful silence bothered Ed more than he admitted even to himself. He was tempted at several points to renew the hostilities so that each man would know definitely where he stood. Better an outright break than a shaky truce.

Only Marquette appeared in good spirits and he sang a ribald ballad loudly. After a while he rode over near the sheriff.

"How's that young kid's shoulder, pretty bad?" he asked.

"I don't think it'll bother him much," Ed replied easily. He noticed that both Les and Mike were listening and a sudden inspiration struck him. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the folded poster. "In fact, I didn't actually get to talk to

him any, but he left me this here note."

"What does it say?" Les asked.

"I ain't read it yet."

The heavy Mike glowered at him. "You mean you been carrying that note all this time and ain't even read it yet?" His voice was thick with sarcasm.

"That's right," Ed replied, looking at Mike levelly. "I ain't read it yet. I'll read it when we nail that stinking outlaw and not before. It can't be so important it can't wait, and I don't want nothing to interfere this time."

Mike lowered his head again, apparently satisfied. Lots of things the sheriff did didn't make sense. Marquette and Les drifted away and Ed smiled inwardly. He had planted trouble. One of them would be doing some mighty heavy thinking from now on. One of them would want that letter awful bad, and before the Bluewater Kid was captured. It also meant that the sheriff would have to be on guard from now on.

In spite of the broken ground, the bandit was easy to trail because he had so little choice. To make time he had to stay in the valleys and quite often his tracks were visible in the dry stream bed. They had passed no water and Ed was quite satisfied that time was on their side. If they stuck at it, they would overtake the Bluewater Kid.

They rode until it was too dark to go on. Then they made a rough camp and rolled up in saddle blankets. The night was extremely black and Ed found it a little difficult to get comfortably situated. When he did get settled he found it impossible to fall right asleep. His mind kept revolving about his sister Nora.

WHY did she have to fall in love with someone like Les Harper? If he had killed Danny and was in with the Bluewater Kid, the sheriff would have no choice, no matter how it hurt Nora. Ed began to weigh the values, his great affec-

tion for his sister against his uncompromising hatred of all that was on the other side of the law. He rolled over restlessly and in doing so saved his life.

A figure hurtled down across the prone sheriff and he felt a knife slash off against his ribs. He grappled with his opponent and pulled himself to his knees. He got hold of an arm somehow and began to twist savagely, bringing forth a scream of pain. Then a foot lashed out, catching the sheriff in the face and he fell back. When he had gained his feet he was clutching the heavy silver six-shooters, but he could find nothing to use them on.

Then someone lit a match to the pile of brush that had been gathered for an early morning breakfast in the dark. In a moment it was throwing out a circle of light, revealing the sheriff on one side of the fire and the other three members of the party on the other.

Ed studied each of them silently, but could detect nothing. And yet one of them, seconds before, had tried to kill him. Ed reached down to his blanket and picked up a knife. It was a long bladed affair with a distinctive leather thong handle. He stared at it speculatively, then scornfully tossed it at the feet of the three men.

They stared as if hypnotized, then Marquette picked it up and slid it under his coat. His face was no longer handsome. "It's mine," he admitted. His lips twisted into a snarl and he glanced from Les to Mike. "It seems I got me a personal score to settle myself."

"I'd be careful what I said," the big Mike warned angrily, towering over the smaller man.

"I'll be careful," the gambler promised coldly. He turned his back on Mike and made his way to where his blankets were piled.

Les picked up his blanket and walked into the darkness without speaking.

It was late the following afternoon when they came across the first concrete

sign that the Bluewater Kid was slowing down. Mike spotted the shiny metal of his empty canteen in the loose rocks along the trail. The sheriff picked it up with a pleased grin and holding it to the sun looked inside. "It's still damp. It won't be long now."

An hour later they lost the tracks. The Bluewater Kid had taken to cover.

"We split up here," the sheriff decided with reluctance. He hated to have any one of them out of his sight and he didn't dare keep them in a bunch lest they lose their prey completely. For a moment he considered taking Les with him, then decided against it. For his sister's sake he would give Les the benefit of the doubt.

The sheriff took the lead, riding boldly into the heart of the wild rock formations ahead. The others spread out behind him. He traveled on warily for perhaps half an hour without discovering any sign of recent travel. Finally he halted in the shade of a huge boulder and wiped the sweat from his forehead. A bullet chipped a spray of granite into his face and whined into space before Ed heard the crack of a rifle behind him. He whirled instinctively and dropped to the ground.

For what seemed like eternities he waited, but there was no further action. It wasn't until he heard another shot far to the left that he got cautiously to his feet and hopped onto his horse. Then he raced madly in the direction of the shot.

He found all three men afoot and surrounding a figure stretched out on the ground. It was the end of the trail for the Bluewater Kid. He was quite dead.

"Who got him?" Ed asked quietly, looking down at the lifeless form. Because of the heavy stubble of beard, Ed would never have recognized the dead man save for the long scar on his face.

"I did," Mike snarled viciously. "Them other two didn't even fire a shot."

"He wasn't even carrying a gun," the gambler mused. "We could of taken him

alive, if Mike hadn't been trigger happy."

"He shot him while he crawled, begging for water, the dirty, yellow—" Les stopped, his voice choked with emotion.

"Now we might never find the gold he got away with," Marquette continued bitterly. "It sure ain't on him."

"I think I can find it," the sheriff put in. It was all beginning to make sense. "Back in that clump of boulders where we had him cornered at first. He was more interested in getting out with his skin than in being weighted down with gold. Whoever was in cahoots with him realized that right off and let him get away." The sheriff looked at them coldly. "After that he was right anxious to kill off the Blue-water Kid so he wouldn't have to split the loot, and also to silence him."

"Let me see your rifle, Marquette," the sheriff demanded suddenly.

THE gambler hesitated, startled, then he silently obeyed. Sheriff Ed Holden held it up against the light and looked through the barrel. It was polished like a mirror. Ed handed it back and turned to Les.

"Let me see it," he asked, holding out his hand. Now was the moment.

Les glanced at the other two men, undecided. They returned his stare silently. Then he swung out his rifle, butt end first. The sheriff took it and held it up to the light. It was as clean as Marquette's had been. He returned it to Les, a baffled frown on his face. He pushed back his hat and turned to Mike. He found himself looking down the barrel of a six-gun.

"You're just too smart to live," Mike sneered, his battered lips twisted. "Let me have that letter Danny left you."

The sheriff hesitated. He didn't want the others to discover Les Harper's secret from the drawing on the poster.

"Give it here," Mike roared. Ed reached

into his pocket and then handed it over.

As Mike reached out, Les went into action. He dove headlong at the big man and Mike fired. The bullet whirled Les around and threw him on the ground. The sheriff fell to his knees, grabbing for his guns but they never cleared leather. Everything went black in a roar of gun-smoke.

When he came to, Marquette the gambler was sitting on the ground beside him humming a Mexican song.

"It just creased you," Marquette assured him as he struggled to his feet. "Les will come out of it too. He ain't bad hurt."

The sheriff tottered unsteadily on his feet and went over to where Mike was stretched out on the ground. His face was shot to pieces.

Marquette nodded. "I had to settle a personal score. He borrowed my knife."

The sheriff reached down and recovered the folded piece of paper which was still clenched in Mike's hand. He slipped it back into his shirt pocket.

Three men rode back toward Lead City, leading two horses laden with their lifeless cargo. Marquette sang loudly, his eyes on the distant hills of home. Les and the sheriff rode side by side.

"I want to tell you something, Ed," Les began with difficulty. "Me and the Blue-water Kid—"

"I know," Ed interrupted, taking the poster from his pocket and handing it to the other.

"He wasn't always bad," Les observed sadly, returning the paper.

The sheriff took the paper and held a match to it. He thought he was going to like having Les for a brother-in-law. "Remember what I said about gunning down my own brother if he was on the other side of the law?" The sheriff was thinking now of his sister. "I guess I couldn't have really done a thing like that. I don't reckon any real man could."

PROMISE FROM BOOTHILL

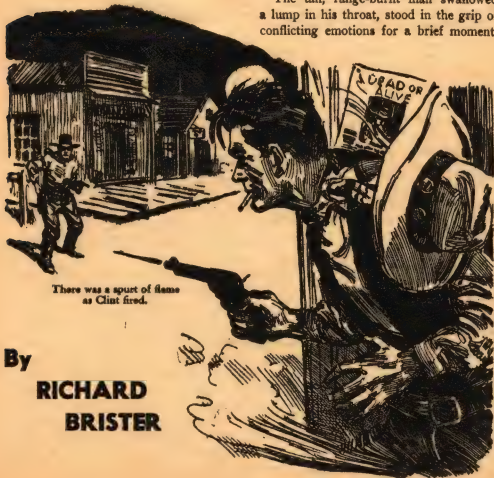
The Old-Timer was duty-bound by a deathbed promise—to smother a skunk's trail.

YATES KERBY was dying. Doc's probing finger could barely detect the diminishing pulse as the gaunt old man on the oaken four poster gasped and fought for breaths that grew steadily feebler. Doc winced each time the old man struggled to fill his great lungs.

"Easy now, Yates," he said, quietly.

"Clint," the old man croaked at the tall, sad-eyed young man at the foot of the big oaken bed, "ride out to the Fork an' meet Jud. He oughtta be slopin' in by now, seems like. Tell him to dig spurs in his cayuse. And don't act so sad, boy. Ain't nothin' sad about a man dyin' at my age."

The tall, range-burnt man swallowed a lump in his throat, stood in the grip of conflicting emotions for a brief moment,



There was a spurt of flame as Clint fired.

By

**RICHARD
BRISTER**

then gulped, "A-all r-right, Dad," and walked out.

Doc said gravely, "The boy figured his place was here, Yates. You could've sent one of the hands to meet Jud."

The old man gasped for air until sweat broke out on the gaunt, white-thatched forehead. "Had a reason to send him, Doc. Gotta talk to you private. Done something kind of crooked on you, back when them two young ones was still in their cradles. Had this thing on my conscience for years. Always figured to tell you, but—" The old man's voice caught in his throat, and he struggled to breathe.

"Now Yates," Doc said, "you save your breath. You and me always stood aces high with each other. You always was too dang long on conscience and doin' what you figured was right."

"Doc, mebbe that's so. Mebbe that's how come I figured to pull off sech a fool stunt on them two boys, when they was too little to know any better."

"Yates, rest easy now, till Jud gets here. No need for you to waste yourself, tryin' to talk, while—"

"Doc, you got to hear me. This is important. I—I done a switch on them youngsters."

Doc felt a shock slide through his thin, bony frame. He rammed his small, pale hands into his coat pockets.

"A switch, Yates? Y-you mean—then Jud ain't your real flesh-and-blood offspring, like the whole range always figured? And—Clint ain't the one you adopted?"

"That's what I'm sayin'."

Doc stared in amazement at the gaunt old rancher lying on the big four poster. Was Yates' mind affected? Doc had brought both of Yates' boys into the world, more than a score of years back. He thought he knew more than anybody about Clint and Jud, with the possible exception of Yates.

He let his mind drift back twenty-odd years, remembering the unhappy day when Clint Rucker, broke and thirsting for the booze which was always his downfall, snaked through the back window of the hardware, during lunch hour, rifled the till, got away clean, and then brazenly got drunk in the Double X Bar.

By the time Yates Kerby, who was the

law in town back in those days, got on the right scent, Clint had left the Double X, taking a full bottle of whiskey with him, and holed up in his cabin at Slash Canyon.

Yates Kerby, almost too right-minded a man for the job of town marshal, had tried to reason with drunken Clint Rucker from behind a big boulder.

"Clint! Come on out peaceful now, and I'll see you get justice."

Clint Rucker's big Henry rifle spanged lead off the big boulder behind which Yates Kerby was crouching. That was the only answer Yates could get out of the drink-crazed, jail-shy Clint until night-fall.

Then there was the sound of a woman screaming for help, inside the cabin. Yates, thinking of Clint's poor wife, set out to storm the front door. Before he reached it, a gun thundered inside and she stopped screaming.

Clint Rucker kicked the door open, and staggered out, pointing the still smoking Henry straight at Yates' big chest. He fired at point blank range, but Yates moved quickly, for a big man. He dropped prone in the dirt path that led to the cabin, heard the slug whine above him, and snapped a quick shot at Clint Rucker with his six-shooter.

He didn't miss. At the funeral for Clint Rucker and his wife, the following day, Yates Kerby took the law badge off his leather vest and handed it to Mayor Bainbridge.

"I seen enough death and killin'," he said. "Just lost my wife less'n two months back. Now I'd like to take that Rucker baby out to the Tumblin' K, t' be raised along with my own motherless younker, an' I'm adoptin' him, legal."

TALK never could budge him out of the stand he had taken, and he had done just what he said he was going to do, raised those two boys, little Clint, and his own boy, Jud, like a couple of brothers.

And now, on his deathbed, the old man was telling Doc he had switched those babes in their cradles.

"Why now," Doc said, "you can't make me believe it. Jud favors you, Yates. And Clint favors his no-account

daddy. And nobody could mistake that."

"And likewise," Yates croaked, "they favor each other. Just like I favor Clint's daddy, Doc. Me and Clint Rucker always was look-alikes, if you stop to think on it. Same big long bones. Same peppered beard and hair. Same gray-brown eyes."

Doc whistled softly through his teeth. "Why, damn me, Yates, if I don't believe you been bamboozlin' us all about them two boys for twenty-odd years. But why, in tarnation?"

"Felt guilty towards the Rucker youngster, after killin' his daddy. Didn't wanta show no favoritism between 'em, here at the ranch. Figured I'd naturally cotton up to my own boy, and he'd always feel like he was wanted, no matter what name was tacked to him. Same goes in reverse for the Rucker boy."

Doc sighed, cocking his head at the dying man. "Yates, if you wasn't such an all-fired stickler for doin' what's right by folks, your life would've been a lot simpler. Why're you spillin' the beans to me now?"

"You brought them two into the world, Doc. You signed them two birth certificates. Could be you'd get in trouble, if—"

"There you go," Doc exploded. "Worryin' about somebody else. And you hardly able to pull breath into you!"

"Doc, you'd've found out for yourself, sooner or later. My boy had that birthmark on the sole of his left foot, remember? I've took pains to keep you from noticin' which of them two's wearin' that birthmark, times when you've been out here doctorin' the boys. But sooner or later, you'd notice, and go rummagin' through your birth records to refresh your memory on it. That's why I've spilt the beans, Doc. You an' me's been close as peas in a pod the better part of a lifetime, an' I want you t' promise me somethin'."

"All right, Yates," Doc said softly.

"Don't never let on, Doc. Don't never tell 'em. Clint'd hate me for lettin' him think he was adopted. And it'd break Jud up inside to learn he's the son of a drunken no-account like Clint Rucker. Jud ain't solid and dependable, like Clint is. Will you do that for me, Doc? Will you give me your word not to tell 'em?"

"Why hell, yes," Doc said promptly.

"Now just you lay quiet and don't worry."

A smile crinkled the cracked dry lips of the man on the four poster. Then he said, "Where's Lottie, Doc? Where's your little girl?"

"Down in the kitchen, Yates. Cookin' up a chicken broth for you."

"She's kind of sweet on Clint, ain't she, Doc? I kinda like the idee. Them two'd make a fine team. Doc, you go get her. I'll tell her—that Clint's the best damn cowhand in Kincaid County, but he sure takes time to his love-makin'."

"Yates, you're spreadin' yourself mighty thin, if you ask me."

"Doc, you send Lottie in, like I tell you," the old man said querulously. "I ain't got a hull heap o' time left, and I mean to use it. Git, now!"

Doc went down the spiral stairs, sighing, and told his pretty eighteen-year-old daughter to make her interview with the dying man as short as she could tactfully manage.

"Say what'll please him. No use to excite him more'n we have to, honey."

"Is he—"

"He's fightin' like a bull, tryin' to hang on till Jud gets here."

Her pretty face, under the dark strands of hair, was etched with half womanly, half childish dismay.

She hesitated in front of the sick room door, and looked back, biting her lips, until Doc nodded soberly at her. "I know, honey. It's not easy. Never is. Just go in and act natural."

She seemed to take heart at his words, and she opened the door. She took one faltering step into the room, then stood in an attitude of shock, frozen to the floorboards.

Then she was retreating, backing up swiftly, till she came against the balustrade. She flung a wild look at him, her pretty face falling to pieces. "Oh . . . Daddy! He's—he's gone."

Doc went to her and put a comforting arm around the small, shuddering shoulders. "There now, honey. Don't you take on. He was in pain, though he never said so. It's nature's pattern."

But inside, he was raging: Damn that Jud. How long does it take a decent man to ride sixty miles, when his father is dying?

He forced the shaken girl to lie down in the spare bedroom, then went onto the verandah and stood gazing at the distant peaks of the Tower Mountains, thinking long sad thoughts of Yates Kerby.

PRESENTLY he heard the beat of hooves at the other side of the ranch-house, and walked through to the front door in time to see Clint and Jud Kerby dismount at the hitchrack. Jud came up the walk in his confident way, sporting a broad-brimmed white sombrero ornamented with silver and gold lace and a golden snake for a band, his thinly handsome figure draped in skin-tight California pants, topped off by a linen shirt and an expensive buckskin short jacket.

Decked out like a Christmas tree, Doc thought with disgust, and his keen eyes noticed that the big claybank was not blowing too hard, and that Jud's silk bandanna was only sparsely sprinkled with trail dust.

"Hello, Doc," Jud said in a voice empty of feeling. "How's the old man?"

Doc looked again at the Fancy Dan clothes, at the handsome arrogant mouth, and said bluntly, "You're just too late. What kept you?"

Clint looked at him numbly, then went over to the side of the house, leaning against it, and put his hands to his face, crying quietly, the way Western men will when curse words will not serve to release wallled-up emotions.

Jud stood mute with shock for a moment, then recovered enough to say, "I never got the word till last night. I'd've rode all night, but didn't see the sense in it. I figured Yates was too tough to die sudden."

Doc scowled. "Since when are you referring to your father as Yates, young fella?"

"Hell, Doc, ain't you on the prod? It's his name, ain't it?"

"You speak more respectful, when you refer to your father. You ought to throw them fancy duds and some of your fancy friends in the discard and stick around home when you're needed. Clint'd soon learn you some manners."

Jud looked at him without expression. "Reckon I'm bound to quit rovin' now, ain't I, Doc?"

"Say what you mean."

"Why, I'm in the ranchin' business now, ain't I? You helped the old man draw up his will, as I understand it. Reckon I'm the new boss around this Tumblin' K outfit."

"You and Clint," Doc amended.

Jud's handsome face lost its mask of sorrow, and turned hard as granite.

"That don't hardly seem fair." He turned toward Clint and said, "I don't mean nothing personal in this, Clint, but you ain't even a flesh-and-blood Kerby. Doc, I ask you, out of all fairness—"

"Shut up, you young fool," Doc gritted at him, and stepping close, he detected what he could swear was a faint barroom aroma. So, he thought, raging, the heartless young skalawag had tarried by the wayside while Yates wistfully waited his coming. "Jud, if you got an ounce of human decency in you, you'll leave off this jackal talk and get upstairs to pay your last respects to your dad."

Jud brushed past him and entered the house, grumbling. Doc went over to where Clint stood, still sobbing, and said gently, "Clint, I know you're broke up pretty bad. So'm I. But you need a warnin'. Keep a sharp eye on Jud, or he'll trim you down to your pin feathers."

"Doc, what does that matter? Jud's right, though. It's his ranch now. I've got no moral right to any part of it."

"Clint, don't you even talk that way. You always did take Jud's leavings around here. But the fact is, you got more moral right, as you say, to the Tumblin' K than Jud has."

Clint blinked wet eyes at him. "How do you figure that, Doc?"

Doc hesitated, remembering his promise to Yates Kerby. Every fibre of his small, bony frame ached with desire to tell this fine boy that he, and not Jud, was Yates' real flesh-and-blood offspring. But a promise made to a man on his deathbed should be held sacred.

"You'll just have to take my word for it, Clint," he said lamely.

He saw that he had failed miserably to inject any iron into young Clint Kerby's system. With a bitter sigh, he went to fetch Lottie for the trip back to town.

Within the next several months, the new pattern of life on Tumblin' K became

clearly apparent. Jud Kerby took to idling away the better part of each day up in town, shooting pool in the back of George Peasley's Tonsorial Parlor, playing stud, afternoons and nights at the Double X, while Clint kept his nose to the grindstone, at the ranch.

On a Saturday afternoon, Clint brought the buckboard into town for supplies, and stopped in at Doc's place to tell Lottie he wouldn't be able to take her to the dance at the Town Hall, as they had planned.

"Work's kind of piled up on me out there, Lottie. I'm sure sorry."

"It's all right, Clint," Lottie said, trying to smile, but dances are something special when you're eighteen, and Doc could tell his little girl was real disappointed.

Right then Jud came swaggering into Doc's office, dressed fit to kill, as usual and said, "Clint, I been lookin' all over for you. Let me have fifty on account. The cards been running against me."

Clint took out his wallet and gave him the money without lifting an eyelash. Jud jammed it into his pocket and said, "Why all the gloom? Feels like a morgue in here."

Doc said sharply, "Lottie was kind of set on goin' to the dance t'night. And she prob'ly could of, if you'd pitch in an' accept your fair share of responsibility out at the ranch, young fella."

JUD looked at the girl, and Doc didn't like the slow grin that twisted the handsome, arrogant mouth. "Is that all? That's easy fixed, Doc. I'll take her my ownself, if she's willin'. And of course," he flung a negligent aside at his brother, "if it's agreeable t' you, Clint."

Lottie's young face lighted up. Jud was undeniably handsome and knew how to dress to the feminine fancy and how to flatter a young girl's pride with a show of elegant manners.

Doc threw a sharp glance at Clint, wanting to warn the sober-minded young fellow, but Clint was looking at Lottie, taking his cue from her eager expression.

"I dunno, Jud," he fumbled. "I—" "Now you ain't goin' to stand in the way of a little innocent pleasure for Miss Lottie," said Jud shrewdly.

Doc could see Clint struggling to reach a proper decision, even as old Yates, before him, had struggled to do what he thought was right and proper. But Jud always won out, whenever it came to a showdown between those two young fellows.

"Well, all right, Jud," Clint said thickly. "You take her."

Take her Jud did. And fair turned Lottie's impressionable, eighteen-year-old head with his fancy ways. The next day was Sunday, and Jud hired a rig and took Lottie driving. Doc noticed the girl came in with a flushed face, and a sparkle in her eyes, after that drive in the country, and he said,

"Honey, you ain't figuring to transfer your affections from Clint to his no-account brother now, are you?"

She looked at him with a troubled expression. "Jud's not a no-account, Daddy. I know he's kind of wild. He drinks and gambles more than he ought to. But lots of good men cut up when they're in their twenties, and then settle down when they meet the right woman, don't they?"

Doc sighed. "Just like your mother. She almost married Jed Barker in the goodness of her heart, hopin' to reform him. I just nosed him out before she threw her life away on him. He wound up in Kittanning, for horse stealin'."

"Why, Daddy!" She was shocked. "You're not saying Jud would steal anything, are you?"

Doc cursed himself for a tactless old fool. "Fact is: I ain't sayin' another word against him."

If he did, pretty Lottie would be bound to defend him against what would appear to be, in her starry-eyed innocence, unjust criticism.

Jud Kerby's flattering attentions to Lottie continued, during the following month and Doc brooded in silent frustration, watching that slick, flashy son gradually nose his steadier, quieter brother out of the picture.

One Wednesday night, Clint rode in to see Lottie, and while the girl was cleaning up in the kitchen, Doc talked turkey.

"Clint, you got to get in here more often. Lottie's always been mighty set on you, but Jud's up here in town pretty near all the time. He's got a mighty

smooth way, with the ladies. Lottie's a mighty sensible girl, but she's young. And the fella that sticks closest to the fire is apt to stay warmest."

Clint looked sick in the eyes. "Doc, I can see which way the wind's blowin'. But there's a million and one things to be tended to, at the ranch. Roundup's comin', and someone's got to—"

"You ain't the only Kerby in these parts. Jud's drawin' his share of Tumblin' K profits an' more, judgin' from the way he's spendin' on good times and presents for Lottie. Seems like you'd tell him to pitch in and earn some of that money he's drawin'."

"I tried that, Doc."

"What'd he say?"

Clint's face turned red. "What he always says when we get in a ruckus, or when I've got somethin' he takes a shine to: I ain't a real Kerby, an' he's got a better right to anything Yates left than I have."

Doc swore. "This's been goin' on since you two was just toddlers, ain't it? An' now he's got the Indian sign on you?"

Clint sighed. "A man's got to do what he figures is right, Doc. I can't help feelin' kind of beholden. Yates took me in an' gave me a home when I was orphaned. Otherwise, Jud'd own the whole shebang now, like he says. And—"

Doc struggled against the impulse to say, "That ain't so. It's the other way around, if you knew the truth of it. You're the real Kerby and Jud's the one that was took in as an orphan." But he had made a promise to the old man while Yates was dying.

He said, "Yates never gave you your hold on my Lottie's emotions, Clint. There's no need for you to take a back seat for Jud there."

Clint's sober face hardened. "Doc, I never meant to. You know how this thing happened. I'll get in here much as I can and put up a battle. I'd marry Lottie t'night, if she'd have me."

Doc felt hope flicker within him. "Son, that sounds more like your dad a-talkin'." He saw shame color the boy's face and said quickly, "I'm referin' to Yates Kerby, when I speak of your dad."

But uncertainty remained in Clint Kerby's face as Lottie came in.

"Reckon you two won't object if I haul my old carcass downtown," Doc suggested, grabbing his hat. "May stop in the Double X for some chess with George Bainbridge. Don't look for me before midnight."

He threw a covert wink at Clint's sober face and walked out.

WHEN Doc got home, promptly at midnight, he found Lottie waiting up for him with a pot of coffee. "Why, you didn't have to do that, honey. Where's Clint?"

"He left at eleven."

Doc frowned. "What's his big hurry?"

"He's got chores to attend to, starting at five in the morning."

"Anything important come up between you two this evenin'?"

"Daddy," she laughed, "the way you fish sometimes. I—I think he was going to propose, but he lost his nerve before he got fairly started. He seemed kind of low in his mind."

Doc sighed. "When you goin' to see him again, girl?"

"I—I don't know. He wanted to come Friday, but Jud's already spoken for that night. And Saturday, Jud's taking me to the dance at Falls Landing."

"Jud appears to've staked out a pretty good claim on your time, little lady. Gettin' kind of serious with you and him, ain't it?"

Her pretty face grew very sober. "Yes. Daddy, he's really awfully nice, when you get to know him. I—I think he's working up to propose. Would—would you be terribly disappointed if—if—"

"If what?" Doc said tensely.

"If I said yes, when the proper time comes?"

What can a man say, when his daughter poses that fateful question? Doc gulped down his aching fears and said slowly, "Why, honey, it's your life . . . if you're dead sure he's the one that'll make you happy."

She came across the room in a little rush and flung herself into his arms. "Oh, Daddy, you're wonderful. You're such a wonderful daddy!"

He stood there hugging his little girl, and blinked at the tears which were starting to cloud his old eyes, while her words

echoed in his saddened ears. Such a wonderful daddy. The words cut at his troubled conscience. But what could he do? He might send her to her Aunt Sophie's, but if he did she would be hurt. And Jud might even follow. If he put his foot down against Jud, they might steal off somewhere and get married.

Yes, he thought bitterly, I'm a wonderful daddy.

Saturday afternoon he was in his office, brooding over his promise to Yates, which was becoming a favorite pastime of his lately. He had the big ledger in which he kept his record of births, on his lap, open at the page on which he had written, so many years ago: *March 16, 1863 . . . born to Yates Kerby and Dolly Colton Kerby, a son, Judson Colton Kerby, weight 8 pounds, 3 oz. Birth normal. Brown-blue eyes. Other identifying characteristics: chocolate birthmark across sole of left foot.*

He was reading the fateful words over and over again in a mood of partial self-hypnosis, when he heard a voice at his elbow.

"Say, ain't you in a funk, Doc? What's so blame interestin' you don't even notice a man comin' into your office?"

Doc swung around sharply and said, "Oh, it's you, is it, Jud? You—uh—you'll find Lottie out back in the kitchen, I reckon."

"What you got there, Doc?"

"Nothin'," Doc said, and closed the book against Jud's prying glance.

He was too late. "Say, ain't that your birth records?"

"That's right. I—uh—I was just checking somebody's birth date for him."

"You got a record of my birth in there, Doc? Let's have a look at it."

Doc sat there like a stone, but he could feel his old heart thumping a mile a minute. Why not? He'd asked for it. When a man comes in his doctor's office and asks to see his birth record, a doctor is almost duty-bound to show it to him. How about that? Wouldn't that kind of let a man out of his promise, with a clear conscience? But he remembered Yates' plaintive voice.

"Fact is, Jud," he said carefully, "I got no record of your birth, or Clint's either. Had another book that got burned up in

that fire, ten years ago. Your birth was recorded in that one."

"Now ain't that something, Doc? S'pose I had to prove my age, some time."

"Don't worry about it. I could give you an affidavit."

"Yeah, that's so, ain't it?" Jud said, shrugging, and walked out to join Lottie.

Doc put the big ledger back in its proper place among his medical volumes. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his heart was still thumping a runaway drumbeat inside his thin ribs. That had been too close for comfort.

Doc had just gone to bed, around eleven that night, when Lottie came in from the dance at Falls Landing. "That you home a'ready, honey?" Doc called through the door of his bedroom.

"Yes, Daddy."

"Home real early, ain't you?"

"Yes. Jud wasn't much fun. He's been acting funny all evening."

"What's eatin' him?"

"I don't know, Daddy. It started right after we looked up his birth date in your ledger, on our way out after dinner."

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Doc's thin body went stiff as a pine board under the blankets. "Y-you looked in my birth records, you an' Jud? How'd that come about, honey?"

"Jud seemed curious about it. I didn't see any harm in letting him look. But after he'd looked he got a terrible headache, and asked if I'd mind if he brought me home early."

DOC swore. So then, his little act this afternoon hadn't fooled Jud. The crafty young fox had outguessed him, had noted Doc's perturbation and gone snooping for the reason behind it.

Jud knew, now, that he was the son of Clint Rucker. Yates' long-kept secret was out, despite Doc's honest efforts to keep it.

"Yeah," Doc said softly, "I can see how he might have a headache, at that."

The girl tossed a question through the door, but Doc's mind was racing ahead of the present, trying to dope out Jud's probable reaction. He struck a match to the wick of the coal oil lamp by his bed, and began to dress hastily.

"Honey, I'm afraid we're in for some drastic doin's around here. I'm gunna ride out to Tumblin' K an' fetch Clint. You go to bed, but keep your lamp lit till I get back, like you're up readin'. I know your curiosity'll eat you up, you bein' a woman, but that's all my conscience'll permit me to tell you, right now."

On the way down to Jones' Livery for a horse, he looked into the Double X bar-room, and sure enough, there stood Jud, bleak and glassy-eyed at the mahogany, trying to drown his troubles in rotgut booze, even as Clint Rucker, his own dad, had done long before him.

After all these years, the set pattern was being repeated. "Blood means to have its way, finally," Doc muttered. "Just hope he don't drink himself crazy violent, like the old man did, before I can fetch Clint in."

On the way back to town with Clint, Doc kept parroting the young fellow's questions with one refrain: Jud's spoilin' for trouble. That's all I'm free t' say, Clint, accordin' to the promise I gave Yates on his deathbed."

Back in town, he told Clint to stay out of sight, then beelined it to Lottie's door,

calling through it, "Honey, you can douse that light now."

"Daddy, what's all the—"

"Honey, you'll know what this is all about soon enough, if things go like I figure they're bound to."

He rejoined Clint in the littered, dark alley behind the house. It was a clammy cold night. They crouched, shivering behind several man-size refuse drums that faced on the back window of Doc's office.

Clint had brought his rawhide lariat along, on Doc's orders, and his big, sober face was a mask of wonderment when a shaft of light flickered briefly upon it.

"Doc, what in the name of Sam Hill are you up to?"

"Shush, boy!" Doc whispered, and gripped Clint's muscular forearm. "Ain't that somebody comin' down from the direction of the Double X now? Sounds mighty unsteady, too. Still, now. An' duck your head down. It's him!"

Jud Kerby had rounded the corner of Peabody's Hardware, and was moving unsteadily along the narrow areaway between the two buildings. As quietly as he could in his drunken condition, he lifted the window of Doc's office, and hoisted his slender body up and over the sill.

"That's Jud!" Clint gasped. "What in the name of sin is he up to?"

"Shush! Keep your peace boy."

Doc took the lariat out of Clint's nervous hands, ran silently to the point of the areaway between the two buildings, and tied the leather rope between the two downspouts, where a man, running in panic, could not see it, but was sure to be sent sprawling by it.

He had just returned to his hiding place when Jud let himself out of the same window through which he had entered Doc's office.

"He struck a lucifer inside there," Clint whispered. "What's he after, Doc?"

Doc answered by stepping boldly out of his hiding place, calling: "You, there. Where d'ya think you're goin' with that page tore out of my ledger?"

Jud stood frozen for a half-second, then cursed, and launched himself in a pellmell dash toward the street. He came heavily against Doc's set rawhide, and was thrown heavily, onto the cinders.

"Damn you, Doc!" he raged, as he

lurched to his feet. "Don't you come near me. Ain't no one but you an' me knows about this." He waved the page of the birth ledger he had taken. "Your word against mine, once I've destroyed this. I ain't fixing for Clint to start lordin' it over me."

Doc walked steadily toward him. "You can't get away with it, Jud. Let's have that piece o' paper."

Jud's right hand moved to his hip and came up again in a brittle jerk. Pale light glinted off the blue metal of his gun barrel. "I been through the meat grinder t'night, Doc. Just you come on another step, if you think I won't drill you."

Doc stood there, reading the hysteria in the man's whiskey-thick voice, remembering how Clint Rucker had acted when caught in a corner, many long years ago.

And then he heard footsteps behind him, and sensed the incredulity Jud felt, as the man peered owlishly through the darkness.

"Clint!" he rasped thickly. "Who cut you in on this ruckus?"

"Put that gun away, Jud," Clint said softly, and kept marching toward Jud. "We're all friends here."

"Just you stay put where you are," Jud grated wildly. "You hear me tell you to stand?" he went on in a rising inflection, as Clint continued to inch forward in the face of the gun.

Doc's chest was so tight he could not draw a breath, could not find his voice to tell Clint his danger. Upstairs in the house, he heard a window slide open softly, and then Lottie was saying, "Jud! For heaven's sake, what's got into you? Have you gone crazy?"

AND it was as if, in that moment, Jud Kerby knew that he had reached the end of his tether, knew that the girl would never feel the same toward him, knew that the secret of his true parenthood was to be a secret no longer. The liquor worked in him and a fury caught at him.

"Sure I've gone crazy," he half-sobbed, half-snarled. "An' I'm takin' you with me. He'll never have you."

He whirled toward Lottie's window, lifting the gun to spank a shot at her. Doc couldn't see Clint's lightning draw

in the darkness. He saw the orange spurt of flame, though, as Clint triggered.

The gun in Jud's hand lept away like something alive, and plopped dully in the cinder footing, while Jud swore vilely, and nursed his creased fingers. He made a grab for his second gun, but Clint lept upon him, and caught Jud's arms behind him.

"Easy now, Jud. You ain't half as mean as you let on, when the bottle's doin' your talkin' and thinkin'. Grab his off iron, Doc, will you?"

In the house, Lottie brewed a big pot of coffee. Doc dressed Jud's creased fingers, while Jud sullenly brooded. "Guess I'm just no good," he repeated. "It was the likker. Except for the likker, I wouldn't've acted so crazy, Doc. I—"

"You had a pretty bad shock t'day," Doc said, "and it shook your foundations. No need t' go on like a schoolboy about it. It was your own snoopin' got you in trouble. I'd never of told you, or Clint either. Yates made me promise."

"I'll go t' jail," Jud whined. "I—I tried to kill Lottie."

Doc considered. "Yates was my friend. He was mighty fond of you. I ain't goin' to press charges, provided you buckle down to your share o' the load at the ranch. If it ain't in you to do that, you can sell out your share of Tumblin' K. I reckon the bank'd finance Clint on a deal like that."

Jud cringed before him. "Doc, I swear I ain't goin' to make any more trouble. I'll sell out. I'll do anything you tell me to do."

Doc noticed Lottie staring at Jud with an expression of sharp pity, and suddenly he knew that problem was over, especially when the girl looked up at Clint with a wonderful smile for the man whose quick thinking, and shooting, had saved her young life.

Well, Yates, he thought, that's like you wanted. And the other thing—about that promise—I never told 'em. Things just kind of happened, thanks to Jud's snoopin'.

"Come on, Jud," he said to Jud, less harshly now, "let's take a walk. I like the way the wind's blowin'. And Clint's got a lot of lost time t' make up for."

LAW OF FIRE

Smashing Novelette of Border Bandidos

By **DEL RAYBURN**



He slammed the table
against the man.

CHAPTER

1

Blazing Border

It was the last and darkest hour before dawn and a big herd was coming up out of Chihuahua, moving with only the low moan now and then of a tired

steer. The riders were a swarthy-faced, heavily armed bunch that looked more like members of Villa's Constitutional Army, which in fact they had been, until his victorious march on the capitol short weeks before had finished their conquest. All but one. That was young Bill Cahill, riding swing on the right of the herd, and trying his best not to let anyone guess it was his first trip below the border and the headiest kind of high adventure.

Bill Cahill was a yearling, riding a wild trail—until he discovered he was "it" in a border-jumping game . . . for killers only.



They hit the Rio Grande at a shallow crossing where it was "a mile wide and hock-deep" and with hardly a pause in gait pushed the herd across it and into Texas. A half-hour more would find the cattle with their hides almost dry and ready to scatter on the far-flung Circle C range. "You got to keep a tail-holt on yourself, Bill, like it had all been in a day's ride for you," the young Tejano kept telling himself as he anticipated big, spur-jing-

ling Tate Skelton's hearty reception.

Tate was Bill's foreman and sort of general manager of the big Circle C now since it had been abruptly dumped into Bill's inexperienced lap by the bushwack killing of his father and old Hob Mulford who had been the Circle C major-domo since young Bill could remember. A week later Tate had shown up with proof that he was some kind of shirt-tail kin and an offer to help Bill out. Since

then he'd just about filled-out all Bill's dreams of what he'd wished for and never had satisfied, as his father was cold-eyed, hard mouth, distant Big Bill Cahill. Until now it seemed to young Bill he'd known Tate Skelton a lot longer and better than he ever had the dominating stranger who had been his blood father who had never had time for his lone, motherless boy, except to ruthlessly smash any evidence of an inclination to strike out at anything on his own.

Sometimes Bill had wondered if his father ever actually realized that he was not still just a small boy. A time or two he had heard whispers that his mother had been a girl of such striking beauty and charm that his father had been without room in his heart for any other love than for her. And that when she had died Big Wild Bill Cahill had hated the tiny son she had left him.

And so it was that there had been a mighty big empty place for Tate Skelton to fill in young Bill Cahill's lonely heart. And that big spur-jingler had filled it. He had encouraged Bill to make the most of his sudden new freedom, had encouraged Bill to let him worry about the responsibilities of running the great Circle C while Bill caught up on the wonders of play and adventuring around which had always been denied him.

Of course there were some folks in that part of the country, like Ranger Captain Grant Haley at the little border town of International Crossing, who thought Skelton's definition of play wasn't the best in the world. They thought it was a bad proposition of drinking too much tequila and topping it off by trying to shoot up the place. In general, raising hell and trying to build a tough shape to travel on.

But to Bill, after the repressed, tight-reined eighteen years that had been his past, it was a new life of heaven come to earth. And this last experience, riding

deep into revolution-scarred Mexico had been the greatest of it all. He was back in Texas now and with him was the herd Tate and sent him after. He'd brought them across the river at an hour when the border riders had given up the night watch and ridden back to their solitary camps for breakfast. He'd pulled a trick that the most experienced border jumper and dealer in wet cattle would be proud of. And he was looking forward now to Tate's praise because that big swashbuckler should be showing up any minute now, his big bull-voiced laugh ringing, bringing his crew to take over the cattle and scatter them after they'd been tallied out and the Mexican crew's major-domo given his payment in precious gold coin.

BYOND the river the trail struck up a canyon to the higher Texas country beyond. The cattle were crowded together here, jostling each other and hooking, and a rider had to pull out on the rough side-slopes above or take his chances on getting too close to one of those saber-tipped horns.

Bill had reined up a moment behind a clump of heavy manzanita brush, glancing back toward the drag. Except for the dull clack of hoofs against stone or of horn against horn, the predawn quiet was complete. And then as he started to rein through a break in the brush and ride on, the eerie half-light of failing darkness seemed suddenly to erupt with gun fire.

In that moment the herd leaped from its docile, grumbling walk into a fear-belowling run. Men were shouting alarm in two languages. A rider went charging past Bill heading for the river, fleeing. And for an instant the cold hand of fear chilled him and he reined that way too.

But as Bill jumped his horse back down the canyon, his gun out now, twisting in the saddle to send a shot or two back at the pin-points of the attackers' muzzle flash, he heard Tate Skelton's

deep-throated laugh ring out like a great bell above the uproar of confusion. Suddenly his fear was gone. He reined aside as another sombreroed horseman fled back down the canyon past him. Bill's face was twisted in a sheepish grin. This was just another of Tate Skelton's rough humored ideas of a good joke: He'd get joshed good if Tate ever found out how he'd started to take off with the Mex vaqueros.

He reined back and started his horse climbing steeply up the slope toward the rim. The light of the coming dawn was beginning to strengthen. A horseman appeared on the dim skyline above, then jumped his mount down the steep slope toward Bill.

Bill reined his horse and stood up in his stirrups, waving. "It's Bill Cahill, cowboy!" he called.

"I'm collecting the bounty on your young border jumping hide right now, then!" the rider yelled back and began throwing lead, shooting wildly from the rough deck of his down-slope plunging horse. He sounded like a crazy man, but his aim was getting better as he came closer. It was more instinct than conscious thought that raised the gun in young Bill's hand and squeezed the trigger. And one calmly aimed shot was all it took to blow the charging killer loose from his saddle. He bounced in the saddle a time or two like a bronc rider slipping his seat. And then he sprawled out over the head of his horse and down the slope to land almost at Bill's feet.

Bill got down quickly and straightened the crumpled form. The fellow's eyes opened to gaze up at him dully. "I'm sorry I had to shoot you, cowboy, but the way you kept coming it was you or me." He recognized the fellow now. He was one of the bunch that Bill had come to know this past month who were usually down at International Crossing hanging around Cantina Del Rio. Once one had

told him they rode for Dutch Mike who owned the cantina and was a high stake gambler who smuggled guns when there was a demand for them at a premium price south of the border, or during slack times for the revolutionaries. He managed to keep busy on the side with an undercover traffic in dope and Chinamen, wet cattle or blooded horses.

"You dewy-eyed young fool," the gunman sneered, then choked momentarily on his own blood. A red froth was beginning to bubble upon his hard lips when he went on. "I'm croaking, so there's nothing I can gain by not telling you. That Tate Skelton you're so big-eyed about is one of the cold-bloodedest, high-binding, big-time crooks that's ever been along the whole border. He's sugared you into signing papers acknowledging him as kin and guardian of your estate until you're twenty-one, which he don't aim to ever let you live to see. He had her made for your dead carcass to be left here this morning with the sign of a herd of wet cattle plain to see and let the law draw its own conclusions. The man that dropped you was to pick up a thousand dollar bounty. Old Wild Bill Cahill sure outsmarted himself, keeping his whelp so close herded and sheltered from the hard knock of the kind of wild young life he'd lived. He sure—he sure—" the fellow gasped, seeming suddenly to strangle. Then he died. And with him had died the good world, the high-spirited world in which young Bill Cahill had been living.

BUT in spite of the taste of dead ashes in his mouth, there was the animal will in him not to die. There were other riders skylined above him in the growing light and others whose presence he knew of by their gunflash beginning to move down the canyon as the last of the vaqueros fled back to Mexico. Bill jumped his saddle and turned his horse south.

And as he rode into the open a shout went up behind and hot lead began reaching out for him. They were shooting at his horse, trying to spill him, to pin him down until they were close enough for better shooting at the smaller target of himself, there in the tricky light of dawn. But that game little pony seemed to realize his peril and wanted to live as much as the young rider he carried. Instead of shying or bogging his head in senseless, terrified pitching when flying lead burned his hide somewhere, he only stretched himself to run harder.

They hit the river without pulling up and the flying hoofs churned up a plume of spray that stood up almost like a cloud to hide them. And then they raced on across the open margin of the south bank and hit the sheltering brush of Mexico.

Bill reined the pony enough to take one quick glance behind. The sight he saw tightened the muscles of his belly with desperation because the riders back there were coming right on across after him. He'd been a long time wising up, but he was seeing things in the light of hard, cold fact now, and realizing that likely every man after him knew this country like the palm of their hand, while he had seen it for the first time less than a month ago. It looked like his horse could outdistance them for awhile, but it was only a matter of time, as was the endurance of all flesh.

And then as the vanguard of his pursuers splashed ashore, the brush around him suddenly came alive with gunfire. Texas gringos might chase them without too much resistance north of that river, but in Mexico it was another matter to fiercely proud, victorious members of the great Villa's legions. They were carrying the attack from hidden positions this time and Texas saddles began quickly emptying. The survivors reined back, emptying their guns over the shoulders and cursing the thick headed greasers for

not realizing the true object of their chase.

Bill Cahill reined up and for a moment sat his saddle unmoving, his horse blowing hard beneath him as he looked with new eyes back at Texas. They were eyes as hard and as cold as ever had been the eyes of his father. All he lacked was the same measure of experience, for in those brief, gunfire-laced minutes just past, Bill Cahill, the boy, had died.

When the other riders had disappeared on the Texas side, Bill straightened in his saddle, looking south into Mexico. Then the surviving vaqueros rode out of the brush, surrounding him. "I think this one had best be taken to our very wise *jefe*, Big Sandy, to do his explaining," said the dark faced old major-domo. To Bill he added, "Our *jefe's* skin is gringo, but his heart, Mexican. And his mind—about treatment for double-crossers."

CHAPTER

2

Midnight Pursuit

Young Bill Cahill still had his sixgun, and his carbine was in its boot under his stirrup leather, no bond bound his arms or his legs, but he was a prisoner just the same. These rough vaqueros would think it great sport to fit one of their rawhide reatas around him and jerk him from the saddle to be dragged through the brush and rocks until he was only a chunk of broken and battered lifeless meat. It was better to bide his time.

Their horses were tired and the country through which they rode had been ravished by war, drunken peon soldados at times wantonly destroying anything that moved by way of target practice, leaving the wasted meat of good beef to rot or feed buzzards and coyotes, while horseflesh met the crueler fate of being ridden until it dropped. And so they found no possibility of a remount.

Evening was drawing on again before

the lifeless emptiness of the country changed and grazing cattle or now and then a small remanent band of horses began appearing. But they were nearing the little backcountry Mexican town of Terrazas. The beautiful hacienda nearby from which the far-flung Terrazas Grant once had been ruled was now in ruins since the passing of the rebel armies. So the village served as headquarters for the white renegade adventurer, Big Sandy O'Shea, who had claimed the great estate in payment for his services and those of the cutthroat crew that followed him. That was the deal Villa had accepted when the revolution was young and he was hard pressed by the vicious Rurales because of his sad want of fighting men to stand with him. And that was the deal he had kept.

Native dogs came out at them in a yapping pack and were cursed off. Then they came to the first low adobe houses. Once the walls had been finished in brightly colored plasters, but this now had fallen away from the brown 'dobe bricks leaving the general appearance of neglect. As they passed, knots of nearly naked children gathered here and there in a courtyard gate to watch wide-eyed and silent. Then they came to the sprawling cantina and turned in.

Leather faced old Indian mozos came from the shadows to take the jaded horses. The major-domo walked straight-backed to the doorway, not giving Bill a side glance, while the others waited on either side for him to fall in behind.

The room they entered was dimly lighted against the thickening outer darkness and all Bill saw for a moment was the gaily billowing skirt and flashing feet of a dancing girl upon whom all attention was, for the moment, centered. She came out of the farther shadows toward the newcomers, as if enticing them, drawing them into the room. He glimpsed her face. Something strange seemed to pass

between them. At least he was certain she had looked directly at him and felt a kindred uprising of attraction.

Then a harsh voice raised abruptly and the gay music stilled instantly. Like a shadow, the girl disappeared and eyes turned upon the newcomers.

"What is it Manuel?" the sharp voice demanded. "Who is this hombre with you?"

Then Bill Cahill saw him, sitting at a table alone in the deep shadows midway along the other side of the room. He was a massive fellow with sandy hair, as his name implied. Heavily loaded *cartoucheras* hung crossed from his broad shoulders bandoleer fashion, one filled with hand gun ammunition and the other with loads for a carbine. He was dressed in an ornate charro suit of soft leather, garnished with bright conchas and silver threaded embroidery. A felt sombrero crusted with tarnished silver thread hung from a stout thong around his heavy neck. The flaring bottoms of his charro pants were tucked into the fancy stitched tops of shop-made Texas boots. He was a *muy grande caballero*, for sure.

And then, Bill came to stand with the vaquero called Manuel, close enough to see O'Shea's scarred face. He realized how serious a mistake it would be to discount the man's dangerousness because of his flashy taste. O'Shea covered Bill with a slow, tawny-eyed gaze which was much like looking into the fathomless depths of a lion's eyes. Then he glanced at the Mexican, as if giving him permission to speak.

"This is the hombre who came to take the herd north to the Circle C with us." He grimaced darkly. "Those gringo *pelados!* Tejano *paisanos!* Those marijuana foolish *cabrons!* Drunken *borrachons!* Stinking, cross-eyed gringo goats," he swore fervently. "They killed two of our men, Chepe and Tano. Yet this young burro for whom the trap was set came

back alive across the river with us."

BIG SANDY'S yellow eyes had brightened, looking Bill over again with increasing interest, as Manuel told it. Now he leaned back. He was laughing inside. And finally it came out in a bellowing roar. "So Skelton drew himself a Joker!" he exclaimed when he'd finished. "And he always figured himself to be so half-smart, compared to us other jugheads." He glanced again at Bill, speculatively. "Do you know what it's all about? Tate had you figured to be kind of sheep-headed. Myself I found it hard to believe the son of as hard a customer as Wild Bill Cahill could fit that picture. To say nothing of the grandson of a crafty old fox like Don Marcos Terrazas. You know about that, too, don't you?"

"I know about Tate Skelton's scheme," Bill Cahill said flatly, meeting O'Shea's yellow eyes unflinchingly. "About Don Terrazas, I never heard of him."

"What do you figure to do about Skelton?" the white renegade asked, watching Bill closely.

"I'm going to make things just as hard for him as I can," young Bill Cahill said quietly. "I'd have given the fool the big Circle C ranch lock, stock and barrel, if he'd only asked me. Until now it has never meant much more to me than an overgrown outdoor jail. I'd have been glad to get away and start drifting."

"How about me—would you like to hand it over to me?" Big Sandy suggested.

"I'm not handing anything over to anyone from here on," Bill said flatly. "I'll fight for what's mine if for nothing better than just to prove no one else can take it."

Again those yellow eyes of the revolutionist, Big Sandy, fixed on young Bill Cahill, probing him for weakness. For a long moment the room was as quiet as death, except for the heavy wheezing breath of a fat onlooker nearby. But Bill's gray eyes looked narrowly back into

O'Shea's without a waver. Finally the man threw his chair abruptly back, as if to startle the young Texan before him, and stood up. But Bill still met his eyes levelly, with no apparent tension.

"I'd almost like watching what trouble you could make that Tate Skelton," the white renegade said finally. "I might even decide to turn you loose to get at it. First I'll find out what your dead carcass would be worth delivered to him, just to cinch the claim he will be busy slapping on the Cahill Circle C."

He stopped speaking as he glanced a moment at Manuel, and then asked, "Where can we hold him?"

Manuel spread his hands with an expressive shrug. "*Quien sabe?* There are no locked doors in this place. And we have never before had the bother of a prisoner."

"*El ley del fuego, then!*" Big Sandy said, giving young Bill Cahill another sharp-eyed study. It was as if he was throwing a grim challenge at his prisoner, as if he meant to test the young Tejano's metal to the limit. The prisoner would have free run of the place, would be treated like a free man. But he would be living only from hour to hour, from day to day or week to week; all borrowed time. For day or night, wherever he was, he would be watched. Every waking minute of the day or night the black dread of sudden death would stalk him. Nerves would taut up until they were as brittle as rawhide strings dried in the desert sun, whirling him, crawling with fear, at every whisper of sound behind him as he waited for the fatal clicking of a gun-hammer which one day would surely come if the sentence was not lifted.

The dark-faced Manuel glanced at the young Tejano with a white, toothy grin. The weeks of peace, since the long months of revolution, raiding, looting, and fighting, had been unspeakable dull for him and the others. Now this promised to be-

come an interesting game. The very relief from boredom they would thus be afforded was young Bill's best hope for life, for they would be reluctant not to make the grim sport last the limit.

"*El ley del fuego*, then; the law of fire—law of escape," Bill Cahill agreed quietly, as if accepting a challenge. "It could be I'll learn some tricks that'll come handy when my time comes to go after Tate Skelton."

Big Sandy O'Shea grinned suddenly. And his hard face was strangely pleasant for just an instant. He said, "I think maybe you're a better namesake for Wild Bill Cahill than he ever knew. He ought to've been shot for fetching you up knowing no more about things outside his fence than you did before today." He glanced again at Manuel. "Take him and find something to take the wrinkles out of his belly, and your own."

THEY were dismissed and it was as if they no longer existed. The yellow eyes looked beyond them. He clapped his hands. "Music, hombres! On now with the dance!" And as if they had only paused to draw a breath the musicians brought their instruments once more alive. But the dazzling, dark eyed young señorita with the tiny flying feet was not so prompt.

"Chiquita!" the big revolutionist rocked the table before him as he slammed down a hard, hairy backed fist upon it. "Where is that sulking Chiquita?" He grabbed the long neck of the tequila bottle he had been emptying. And as the girl came flying back from some resting place, into the center of the room, he drew the bottle back and sent it slamming into the floor before her. Flying glass drew tiny flecks of blood as it lightly slashed her ankles and before she could side-step, one foot came down with her weight behind it upon the jagged base of the broken bottle. She flashed him an incredulous look of wide-

eyed hatred, and then fell to one knee as she gingerly lifted her deeply gashed foot from the glass, her blood already staining the packed dirt of the floor.

"On your feet, you black-eyed hellcat!" O'Shea bellowed, seeming to take pleasure in the sight of her distress. "A little scratch like that won't slow you none. Quick now—" he began a slow reach for his holstered gun. "Or I'll give you something to be lightfooted about!"

Bob Cahill had stared in unbelief at this gross act of cruelty. But sight of O'Shea reaching for his gun started him acting. He had paused to one side of the fellow's table and before anyone realized what he was about he grabbed the table edge and heaved, slamming it back against the man. O'Shea stumbled back against the heavy chair behind him and abruptly sat down, his weight going against it so heavily that it tipped. He rocked on back and fell sprawling to the floor.

An experienced fighter likely would have followed right on through with his advantage of surprise and landed heels first on top of the downed man, but young Bill stood petrified as if just realizing what he had done. And perhaps that fact alone saved his life.

Somewhere a gun went off and the light in the room was snuffed out. Almost the same instant, as men everywhere leaped angrily into action, a small hand gripped Bob's arm and tugged insistently. It was black as the inside of Hades, so that he could not see even the outline of her, but somehow he knew who had hold of him. They dodged through the rapidly mounting uproar and in a moment were outside. Behind Bob could hear Big Sandy O'Shea, bellowing Spanish machine-gun fashion. He would have the whole pack hard upon their trail within another instant.

But the girl did not hesitate or falter with fearful realization of what she had done. Together they raced on and the form of a stout picket-corral fence loomed

out of the new night's gloom before them.

"Osuna!" the girl called sharply in a guarded tone as they neared the corral. As if awaiting her signal an ancient mozo materialized from the last low 'dobe which flanked the narrow alley-like street up which they ran. The girl spoke to the old man in such rapid-fire Spanish that Bill could not follow.

He led them back into the building which proved to be a stable. Quickly he raked a pile of horse manure away from one inner corner and revealed a crude trap door which he lifted. The girl hopped down into the black hole below without hesitation and there was no time, Bill knew, for question or deliberation.

The door was replaced above their heads and covered. The odor of the covering fouled the air in the black hole, but there was no complaining from the girl. And though he could not see her, Bob could feel her presence there in the darkness and it was reassuring. A small, cool hand groped through the blackness and found his and then he caught the perfume of her hair and forgot the unpleasant odor seeping down from above. "Old Osuna is risking his life for us," she whispered. "The Apache trackers in that evil white *cabron's* pack would have trailed us down here before now had it been daylight. But tonight old Osuna will send them riding a false trail after us."

"Have you stopped the bleeding of your foot yet?" Bill asked. "You won't be able to go far if you lose too much blood."

He heard her sharp gasp. "Stupid one that I am! I forgot the foot and its blood. My own blood may betray—" Her voice hushed off. Outside, nearby, sounded the excited, angry voices of many men.

"He will kill old Osuna if he finds us here—" the girl whispered in a dry sob.

BOB gave her small hand a light squeeze, shyly wanting to reassure her, finding it good to have someone in

need of his encouragement. Especially someone so lovely and small and game as she was. "You must have other friends around here," he reminded. "Who shot that light out?"

"Yes, there are others," she whispered. "Men our good Don let come down to join the gringo. One day they will help overthrow him. But it is too soon yet for them to act. The people have not yet felt enough of this new master's bloody hand."

Through the nearby ground came the sound of heavy footsteps and then from almost directly above them, it seemed, they heard Big Sandy's heavy voice questioning the old mozo. Then there was the stoic voice of old Osuna. "I had fed and brushed the master's own *caballos*, as is my evening duty. I had lead out the last two, taking them back to the open pasture for the nights grazing, when this gringo and the dancing señorita ran at me. He struck my poor head with his gun and then they were gone into the night and I called out to you."

O'Shea seemed to consider this in silence for a moment and then his heavy voice murmured, "Likely she's trying to get back to that village south of here where we picked her up—taking that kid with her. We'll head them!" He called out sharply for his men to saddle and ride and the next few minutes were filled with sounds of confusion as men fought to be mounted first. Then the ground shook with the hammer of many hoofs as the renegade troop swept south into the night.

That same moment there was a quick scraping overhead and the confining door jerked off their place of hiding. It was old Osuna, his usual stoic calm abandoned, his voice sharp with urgency. "Quick!" he showed a vaquero's charro outfit at the girl. "He has left Apache spies behind. We must ride after the others as if slow ones. I have *caballos* waiting." He produced high peaked sombreros for all of

them, and in a moment, when the girl changed into the man's clothing, he led them out around the corrals into the thick brush on the far side where three saddled horses waited.

CHAPTER

3

Hideout Rendezvous

Bill Cahill had been lost for hours. He was sure they had headed west from the village of Terrazas. Soon after the trail had begun to climb and for hours now they had been winding up and down rougher mountain trails than ever he had ridden even in broad daylight. Most of the time he could not even see the old mozo leading the way as calmly as if he were escorting them down the broad street of a town. Many times sharp switch-backs in the trail seemed to snatch even the girl from his sight. The ride through the night blackness, over mile after mile of the tortuous mountain trail, had given him an eerie, empty feeling in his stomach.

The high country chill had him shaking in his saddle long before dawn, but he was afraid to dismount and trust his own feet to keep to the trail in the darkness. For in a fashion not too uncommon among saddle men, he trusted a good horse's judgment and footing on a hazardous trail far beyond his own. He could ride across areas that threatened to slide into some bottomless abyss below without giving it a thought, while the prospect of having to walk across such a place on his own feet would leave him inwardly shaking and wishing he could get down and crawl.

Dawn finally broke and old Osuna turned aside and found a place to make a hideout camp. He had a buckskin sack of jerky tied to his saddle and he gave them each a handful, then picketed the horses and disappeared back down the way they had come. It was not until he

stretched out to rest a bit that Bill realized how bone-tired he was. He thought back and found that the night just past had been his third without any sleep. Somewhere during that moment of recollection he slipped his hold on consciousness and the next he knew someone had put one of the saddle pads across his shoulders to keep him warm and the sun was rising red and angry over the mountains on the wrong side of camp. It took him several moments to realize that sunrise was long since past and that this was sunset.

He sat up stiffly and found half the jerky still in his hand. He found his lips and mouth feeling parched and a terrific thirst within him. That drove him to his feet to seek the small stream nearby.

The girl, Chiquita, had appeared from somewhere when he arose from drinking. Her eyes were upon him, bright with interest. "You feel ready now for another night following old Osuna?" she asked with a smile.

He grinned back at her and nodded. "How are you making it? How's your foot?"

She shrugged lightly. "I have bathed it in the cold water down the stream and bound it tightly. Perhaps Chiquita will not again dance so lightly, but I think she will be all right. Perhaps though the next time a *muy grande caballero* serenades Chiquita, could be she'd better grab him for a husband, maybe. A señorita with a limping walk might seem not so much of grace and beauty to him, no?"

Bill's experience with women was as slight as the rest of his experience had been with anything outside the Circle C fence, but for an instant he wondered if she was spreading a loop to forefoot him. And then as he glanced at her and found her sober eyed and serious, awaiting his opinion, he was ashamed for having thought it. Ashamed and, now that he thought of it, a little disappointed. The fellow that Chiquita cocked her loop for

would be able to do a whole lot worse.

Bill glanced at the ground and chuckled as he said, "You come hunt me up at the Circle C ranch in Texas, Chiquita, if you ever have trouble of that kind. I may not qualify as a *muy grande caballero*, but you could limp on both feet and—"

She cut him off laughing. "You make a big joke, but Chiquita likes you for it."

"Well, maybe it is a joke at that, and not a very good one either, thinking I could interest a girl like you," Bill said gravely.

"Oh no!" the girl protested instantly. "The joke Chiquita means is that the granddaughter of Don Terrazas' majordomo might think of such a thing as ever marrying the old Don's grandson."

She ran then, limping a little upon her sore foot, and left Bill staring after her in puzzled wonder. This was the second time someone had said something about him being a grandson of old Don Marcos Terrazas. He decided to ask straight out about it as quick as Chiquita or old Osuna came back.

BUT it was half an hour later before the leathery-faced old Indian returned. The last golden glory of sunset crowned the Western sky, leaving the wild mountain valleys robed in deep purple shadows. He was too full of purpose to be bothered with any questions. "Even the gringo's Apache trackers could not hold the trail of Osuna," he announced with grave pleasure. "It is safe now to ride on to the camp of Don Terrazas."

They saddled quickly and moved on, seeming to strike out aimlessly into the thickening dusk, except that the old mozo appeared to know exactly where they were bound though there was not the slightest sign of a trail before them. They dropped from the grassy, lightly timbered plateau where they had camped for the day, plunging down an abrupt slope through heavy timber where already hung

a gloom of midnight blackness. After a mile or more of that rough going they reached the floor of the canyon.

A racing stream tumbled down the canyon, here and there lashing at the stone walls as if seeking to escape them. Beyond the water loomed the rugged outline of a sheer rock wall. But Osuna put his horse into the icy torrent without hesitation, driving hard for the night-shrouded wall of granite.

As the old Indian neared the far side he rode clear of the sweep of the current. Abruptly he reined his horse back upstream. And then the night seemed to open and swallow him. He disappeared before Bill Cahill's very eyes.

Chiquita executed the maneuver close behind him and then she too seemed to be snatched from sight. And then it was Bill's turn. He wheeled his horse upstream as the wiry pony lunged clear of the tricky current and into the quieter water that ran along the base of the towering upthrust of rock. And then he saw it, a narrow crack hardly wide enough for a horse and rider to squeeze through, opening there where a fault in the mass of stone ran down to the water's edge.

Bill found the others waiting when he reached the head of the narrow fault. Two lean vaqueros with saddle guns in their hands were talking eagerly to old Osuna. When Bill rode up the old mozo turned briefly to the girl, saying, "Take the young Tejano on to Don Terrazas' cabin."

Chiquita reined on into the night with Bill riding up along side. A short ways beyond they left the timber in which the fault had topped out and entered a park which, from what Bill could tell in the darkness, seemed to be quite sizeable. A mile beyond, at what he judged to be the far side of it, they struck timber again. Just beyond there, far enough back in the trees to be hidden, they found a system of corrals and a gathering of rough cabins.

The girl reined up before one and called, "Grandfather!"

Almost immediately the door opened. Outlined in the dim light of a smoking wick fed by melted bear grease, was a grizzled, barrel-chested, bow-legged old vaquero. "¿Quién sabe?" he demanded sharply, peering toward them, trying to make old eyes penetrate the darkness as young eyes could not do.

"Chiquita," the girl laughed softly, slipping from her saddle and starting to limp toward him.

"Chiquita!" he bellowed, flinging his old arms out to her in greeting. "My little lamb has come back from the den of that bloody-handed gringo bandido!" He embraced her warmly and by then his eyes were well enough adjusted to the darkness to make out the shape of the other horseman. "Who is that?" he demanded, his hands still upon her shoulders.

"Our patron's Tejano grandson, Billito Cahill, whom he has never seen," Chiquita said softly. "Since I have been a tiny girl I remember the good Don burning candles at the feet of the statue of our Lady of Guadalupe. Praying that before Death claimed him he might see the son of his only daughter, whom he loved better than life itself but whom he disowned in a moment of anger when she ran away one night with the laughing, reckless Tejano cowboy who had stolen her heart away—after first coming only to steal one of her papa's golden colored stallions. Go tell him now, grandfather, that his prayers have been answered."

"Can this thing be?" the old rider murmured. With a quick motion of his hand to Bill he said, "Please come a moment into the light, young man, that my old eyes may first look upon you."

A few minutes later he led the way eagerly to a larger cabin which sat apart from the others. Inside they were greeted by a gaunt but rail-straight old man who

wore the ornate clothing of a Spanish horseman. He had the sharp features and piercing eyes of an aristocrat and the bearing of inborn authority. "Patron," old Juan de Risa, Chiquita's grandfather, the major-domo began with grave respect, "this is young Señor William Cahill from Texas."

THE snowy-headed old don stared at Bill a long moment as if daring him to affirm his identity. And then the cold old eyes softened. As if that was his signal to retire, old Juan slipped back out and closed the door.

"The Señor Dios be praised," Don Terrazas whispered. "For eighteen years I had the standing offer of fifty thousand Yankee dollars in gold to the man who would steal my grandson from that wild man, his father, and bring him to me. And for eighteen years I grew older without the comfort of an heir in my great hacienda."

"Then the bandidos of all Mexico, of the whole world, band together in what they have the effrontery to call the Constitutionalist Army, killing, looting, burning. My hacienda is destroyed, my cattle gone, my peons scattered and dead. Now I live like a bandido hiding in the mountains, living on venison *carne seca* for the most part, and *frijoles* when one of my vaqueros is lucky enough to steal some in the low country. But tonight my grandson has come to me and my heart is full of thanksgiving for the first time in all the years since my little girl rode away another night to marry a gringo."

He led young Bill Cahill to a rawhide chair beside his at the stone fireplace. They were still there when the gray of dawn began stealing back across the mountains. A lot of things had been cleared up for Bill. He had the whole story now of the bitter feud between two strong willed men in which he had been the innocent pawn. It helped him under-

stand a lot of things that he had resented and been puzzled by about his father. And now he even understood the treachery Tate Skelton had dealt him.

"Skelton, O'Shea and Dutch Mike are three of the craftiest two-legged wolves that have ever preyed upon man and beast along the bloody border," the old don told him. "Everything one of them gets is split three ways equally among them. It was even their scheming which first set my heart against your father so that your mother had to run away with him to become his wife. For years they have worked hand in glove toward the day they all believe is now about to dawn—the day when they will be the undisputed owners of the great Circle C north of the border and of the Terrazas Grant south of the Rio. With control of both sides of the border for such a long way, they have the foundation, or so they think, for the greatest rustling and smuggling and gun running combine that has ever operated. It would be profitable beyond imagination, and they have their contacts already made for the purchase of political favor whereby protection may be assured. But their whole scheme depends upon their establishment of an iron-clad claim to the land."

He paused, glancing from the flames he had been watching in the fireplace, settling his gaze upon Bill. Bill met the serious old eyes calmly and as if reading the older man's mind said, "That sounds like someone figures on you and me not living much longer."

Don Terrazas nodded slowly. "Alive, you are even more dangerous to their plan than I. You are a legal heir to both estates."

A rueful smile broke the serious planes of young Bill's face for just a moment. "If I'm so dangerous," he said carefully, as if listening to each of his own words, "I guess it's about time I started acting like it."

The old don looked at Bill, a mixture of anger and sorrow in the dark eyes as he said, "Perhaps it was not a good night after all. Perhaps you have joined me at last only to die. With the bandidos now the lawful lords of the land, their field campaigns over, O'Shea has scouts combing the mountains for me. Each day they come a little closer. Until now—" He paused, shrugging, spreading his long-fingered hands. "Now it is a matter only of days. Perhaps even of hours. Then one of them will stumble across us and after him the whole pack will soon come racing."

"What's holding us from making a fast ride to the north side of the river some dark night?" Bill questioned.

The old don pursed his lips and seemed to consider this before he finally said, "Pride. Perhaps foolish pride. For I could content myself to live out my remaining days with only the food I need, a little shelter and a place to sit in the sun. Perhaps I could even content myself to see my only grandson begin his manhood a poor man." He seemed to have finished speaking, and then a wry chuckle sounded from him briefly as he added, "But I would rather not. I would rather fight—even die fighting, for what little still remains that is mine. Once I had gold that would take one clerk a week to count. Once I had cattle that were almost beyond number and remudas of hundreds. That had been my inheritance and should be yours, but now it is all gone. All, that is, but the golden *caballos*, the great-great grand colts of royal Palamillos presented by the good Queen Isabella to my family. Not one has yet been sold. They are beyond replacing. I brought five hundred of the very finest into these hidden mountain meadows with me after I had seen everything else being swept away. I want to take them with me when I leave Mexico. And again I say, that must be soon, my grandson, or for us it will be never."

"I am not afraid to fight," Bill said quietly. "I have found that out these last few days. But before I come again face to face with old hands like those three, I would like to know a little more of how to fight. I wonder what my father would have done in such a place as this?"

The old don's white head shook sadly. "I hate to see you learn the things that wild one would have done, but that is better than for us to die. And even dying is not so bad, I think, if one does not die like a harmless sheep."

The thought seemed to put new spirit into the old man. He sprang up, suddenly restless, and Bill got up with him. The don glanced at him sharply, nodding his head. "I believe Juan de Risa can teach you, for I believe you will learn quickly and Juan was once a famous California bandido. Perhaps he can teach you how even to return a little of our sorrow to Señor Skelton, and then to multiply it—before you kill him. And may the Señor Dios be with you, my grandson. You will need Him."

CHAPTER

4

A Man's Game

A rustlers' moon was peeking its great, red jolly face over the rugged eastern horizon. Its light had just begun to penetrate the deep shadows of the early night. It was so quiet here where Cahill Canyon came down to the river on the Texas side that even the shuffling feet of a walking horse seemed to raise a racket as a solitary rider came from the canyon shadows and did not check the running walk of his horse until they came to the very water.

The fellow reined up there and for a moment sat as if listening. Finally he raised a low, short whistle. Then he listened again.

Presently an answer came from the brush on the Mexican side. A moment

later another rider appeared, this one across the river. He raised a hand in silent greeting as he cleared the brush and let his horse move on to the river and into it.

"Howdy, Tate," the newcomer said heartily as he joined the first rider in Texas. "Long time no see."

"You got a herd behind you, I hope," Tate Skelton asked.

Big Sandy nodded, "I think so. Your business that rushing?"

"Business somewhere must be rushing, but it ain't been mine," Skelton said dourly. "What do you mean, you think so?"

Big Sandy shrugged. "I've had this bunch gathered five times. It's got to the point I'll only bet on them being still together when I'm right where I can see them. And even then I'll take no bets on a five minute future. The first time they was stampeded square through our camp. That started some of the vaqueros scattering their beds out beyond camp in the brush. So they was in the clear when it happened a second time. After that everyone started sleeping in a hideout bed. And then we began finding one or two men dead in their beds every morning. The Terrazas brand was always carved on their foreheads. So finally everyone moved back into camp. Then someone started shooting up the fire just as the outfit was set to eat supper. Before that was over—"

"They should have tried waking up some night with the bunkhouse on fire, then had someone sitting out in the dark taking potshots at them whenever they tried to duck out," Tate Skelton interrupted, lest anyone get the idea they had suffered all the trouble. "We've made that Circle C fence jack rabbit tight, and gun guards riding it, but the fence gets jerked down and the steers and horses disappear. I've had to raise my fighting wages. And we're not alone, either. Dutch Mike's cantina's been shot up three or four times by someone riding around out-

sido with a rifle taking potshots at windows. It's got so no one wants to go in his place after dark no more."

They sat there looking at each other for several moments; two big, hard-faced, trail-wise men. The growing mellow light of the big moon raised sinister shadows in the hollows of those faces. Then a mirthless chuckle raised roughly from Big Sandy O'Shea's throat.

"What's so funny?" Skelton demanded irritably.

"Us!" O'Shea exclaimed. "Us belly-aching. Us riding the other side of the fence now. We've always thought this was what we wanted, but now we're belly-aching. A few years ago we was having nothing but fun."

"Our troubles are nothing that burying a certain young party I know won't put an end to," Skelton growled. "Who else could it be but that Cahill kid?"

"Yeah," Big Sandy nodded. "We kind of sold ourselves short thinking old Wild Bill's orphaned button was nothing but a runny-nosed little old poddy calf that'd hang himself if he was let run on enough rope. I won't never make that mistake again."

"We'd better get down to the cantina," Tate Skelton said, starting to rein around. "He sent out word this evening he wanted to see me and you too, if you showed up. Maybe some of his outfit's picked up something."

O'Shea started to rein his horse around too, and as if their movement had been a signal the night quiet suddenly came apart with a bang. Their sombreros leaped from their heads and then sand was geysering up around their ponies' feet as high powdered rifle lead whistled angrily nearby. The startled horses bugged their heads, catching their riders in the act of grabbing for their guns and thus off-balanced. Both men unloaded.

And both came down running, hats gone and set afoot here on a stretch of the

Rio Grande they had proposed to run according to their own liking. The hidden rifleman helped them on their way with shots that came close enough to make even hides as tough as theirs crawl.

THEY made it to the mouth of the canyon and dove into the nearest brush. But the hot lead kept following them so that they had to scurry on, like a pair of desperate rabbits burrowing deeper into cover.

Then the gunfire ceased as abruptly as it had started and left them crouched in the black brush, panting. "Just wait until I take my knife to that smart kid's ears!" Big Sandy said in a low growl between breaths. "His luck can't keep running with him forever."

"You know how long it took us to get his old man," Tate Skelton reminded grimly.

"I know how long it's taken me to even get an old rained-out track that would give me a half way idea where to look for his old granddad," O'Shea admitted. "But a Pache scout thinks he's found the place. All he's got to do now is find a way in. One of these nights we'll settle those two for keeps."

They stayed there for several long minutes, and that kind of cowering was rough on big, high-handed men like that pair. Finally Big Sandy O'Shea could stand it no longer. He began working his way back out of the brush. Over one shoulder he growled, "Let's get down there and see Dutch. If he knows anything that'll help bring this thing to a quick showdown, I'm for hearing it!"

He came to the edge of the brush and ventured on out stiffly, ashamed now for having run in the first place. It was the startling, unexpected dangers of the nights past that got a man conditioned to run before he even had time to begin thinking. "I'd have cut the ears off one of my *soldados* during the revolution for turning

rabbit as quick as I do now!" he growled as if talking to himself as he stalked on out into the open with an air now of daring someone to make him trouble. "Made deserters carry the dried things in their pocket to remind them that one more time and it'd be their damn head. I'm keeping that Cahill kid's ears to remind me of a few things, like shooting instead of talking, after this!"

Three hours later when they limped into Dutch Mike's Cantina Del Rio, simply shooting young Bill Cahill on sight and cutting off his ears would have been merciful and mild compared to the revenge they had plotted to distract their hate-filled minds from their burning, blistered feet. Only three rough appearing riders stood at the usually crowded bar, two of them in idle conversation with brassy looking honky-tonk girls. The third man was gazing into his drink with an air of detached boredom. But they all swung around when they heard the rap of the newcomers' bootheels.

A game was going at a table in a back corner of the room. A bull-shouldered fellow dressed in the rich black broadcloth of a gambler sat with back to the corner where he could keep the whole room under his expressionless eyes, as well as the game. His head was square hewn, the Prussian cut of his hair adding to the impression. He covered the newcomers with his icy gaze, without apparent recognition. But he turned his hand face down upon the table and quit the game immediately, coming straight across the room to them.

"Where the hell you two been?" he greeted them in a low, flat voice. "I been wondering if I could wait for you to show up. We've got to get moving!"

"We ain't been sitting playing poker!" Big Sandy O'Shea bristled. And Dutch Mike's eyes flickered with surprise at the warning. He glanced at their dust covered boots, then back at them, his narrow-lidded eyes widened a little now.

"We was shot up and set afoot," Tate Skelton growled, fingering the bullet hole torn in his fancy Stetson.

"Cahill Crossing?" the gambler asked quickly. And when both men nodded he added, "I'll bet that's where they're going to try shoving them across."

"Who's shoving what across?" both of the others asked together.

"That wild Cahill kid and old Terrazas!" Dutch Mike said sharply. "I've got a tip they've quit the old man's hide-out and are pushing a herd of his Palamillos very soon out of the mountains with them."

"So that's where that old crook's yellar caballos disappeared to!" Big Sandy exclaimed. "He would start moving them out just when I'd finally begun getting close to his trail."

"Those ponies are worth thousands," the gambler said roughly. "And it's our chance to put the finishing touch to our set-up in a single sweep. If anyone tries a cat and mouse game again with either that kid or the old man—" He let it hang there, his eyes shuttling from one to the other of them. And tough as the other two were, they looked uncomfortable before big Dutch Mike's cold gaze. He was the brains, the master schemer and hatcher of plans in this three-cornered combination. And they had failed him in not putting young Cahill and old Terrazas away before now.

He turned. "Come on to the office while I get my hat and another gun. We'll leave the back way. If that damn ranger hasn't pulled out yet I think we're safe to figure he hasn't got a tip-off and won't be around somewhere underfoot to be watched for."

HE LED the way into his office, twice raised and lowered one of the window blinds before turning to the further arming of himself. Dutch Mike was a good hand at laying plans and finding

other men to work them for him, but he had started in on this border taking his own part, doing his own killing, and he was still as dangerous as any man he could hire in a fight. He checked the loads of the short-barreled gun he always carried in a shoulder holster, spinning the cylinder. Then he strapped on a heavy buscadero belt under his long-tailed coat. He was checking the big guns that rode its holsters when a soft knock sounded at the outer door. The gambler glanced at Skelton and nodded. Skelton moved to the door, lifted the stout bar across it and then pulled the heavy bolt that locked it. A little ratty-faced man who had the look of nothing more dangerous than a bar-fly slipped in.

"What's the word, Peeper?" Dutch Mike demanded tonelessly.

"Grant Haley's still at headquarters," the newcomer piped. "Seems to be working late on some papers."

"Good!" the big gambler said. "You stick there until you know he's gone to bed. If he even looks like he might be fixing to take a ride, you get one of the boys I'll leave here to ride out to tell me. We've kept our shirttails clear of the law so far and this is no time to begin taking chances. Understand?"

The little man nodded and slipped back out. Dutch Mike picked up a wide-brimmed black hat and pulled it firmly down upon his head, glanced around as if making one last check, then moved toward the door. "I guess we're ready. My bunch is waiting a ways beyond town. This time we'll set a bear-trap that works!"

Young Bill Cahill roused up from the place where he had been hunkered in the Mexican brush, turning his ear to the shadow-filled night beyond the river. The light had been out in Ranger Captain Grant Haley's headquarters building over there for at least two hours. He had begun to wonder if something had gone

wrong. And then he caught the faint sound of movement out in the river water. He moved forward to where he could see a little better. A moment later a man came wading out, moving carefully in an obvious effort to make the least noise possible. And Bill recognized the shape of him.

"I been needing a bath," Captain Grant Haley said, his South Texas drawl laced with a musical chuckle as Bill came out to meet him. "They've got a damned little spy watching me and I'd begun to think I wasn't going to get out."

"We can't cross the horses here then?" Bill asked, not quite covering the anxious sound in his voice.

"You'll just have to leave some of your vaqueros to hold them until there's no time left for anyone to warn that Dutchman," Haley said. "You've fooled that trey of sly border wolves on this deal so far—they never thought of anything so ridiculous as that someone might bring anything into the states strictly legal."

"We're running an added risk of losing them every hour they stay in Mexico," Bill reminded. "And that'll sure throw me short-handed in a fight."

"Well, son, I've been having to make out the best I could short-handed for years," Haley chuckled dryly. "They're sure laying a bear-trap for you after the grief you've been handing them. I know how you feel—you need every hand you can take with you. But if you don't ride on into their trap and give us a chance at them, all together, you're liable to put in the best years of your life fighting them, all under cover, like your Dad and I have. We were trying to boomerang another deal almost like this on them when he got killed. It's a man's game and a bad one, but you're the only one that can play this hand out if you want the thing finished."

Bill Cahill chuckled bleakly. "Don't worry, Uncle Grant, I'll play her out."

"I'd throw away my badge and the

years I've put in the ranger service and ride with you, boy," Captain Haley said gruffly, looking up to meet young Bill's eyes squarely. He was built like a sturdy oak barrel set on a pair of saddle-bowed hickory legs, a cowman to his marrow, and he hated this thing he was having to do. "I'd gamble all that to side you, but there's other folks besides my friends in this country I've got to think of. It's not that no other man could do my job, but it'd take him time to break in and know the country like I do. It'd be time those three would make good use of, if we happened not to finish them. But if you can job them somehow into a move, even the snakiest politico can't question being outside the law. Me and a couple of my rangers are going to be prowling around in the brush watching the show and we'll mighty soon step in and take a hand. It's got to be legal ranger business though. They'd like nothing better than to get me off base on a fight of my own. There's big political friends of theirs that would be mighty pleased to see my goose cooked. That would leave others depending on me without protection."

Bill Cahill nodded. "I understand, Uncle Grant. Just you be standing by to take a hand when the law gets busted. But you remember, like I'm telling all the others, that Tate Skelton's for me."

The grizzled old ranger stuck out a hard palmed hand to grip Bill's and murmured, "Shoot straight, kid."

Bill raised his hand in a casual parting salute and turned back into the brush to his waiting horse.

except for one, all heavily armed and all of them having to keep on the move because they were handling the big herd short-handed. Even Bill Cahill's horse carried the silver-flashing rigging of a Mexican vaquero while he was garbed in the leather charro outfit and high-peaked sombrero he had borrowed from one of O'Shea's crew that had been about his size. He was riding the point on this herd tonight.

He came to the margin of the river and urged his horse on into the water, using his spurs a little now to hurry the pony so he would hit the other side ahead of the cattle. As he rode back on to dry ground in Texas a rider came spurring out of the dark canyon just beyond. He raced up to Bill, hauling his mount to a rough stop as he swore, "What in hell's wrong with you stupid greasers? Your boss sent word for you to hold up that drive of cattle."

Bill shrugged, slouching in his saddle and spreading his hands in imitation of Mexican indifference. "We take orders only from our *jefe* in person when they are not what he has told us before," he murmured in liquid Spanish, "but if you Tejanos will not receive his cattle we will take them back to Mexico until he comes to tell us what to do." Without waiting for further discussion he reined his horse about, jumped him into a run back at the lead steers just then approaching the Texas shore. The steers shied away from the horse driving at them, and in sudden alarm turned back upon the cattle following them. Within a moment of time there was a churning mill of bewildered animals there in the midst of the river. And the yelling and reata waving of the riders that had been driving them only seemed to add to their frenzy and make the snarl worse.

Back in the brush of the Texas slopes overlooking the river there was suddenly a lot of frantic action as Dutch Mike's bull-voiced bellow lifted: "Get out there

CHAPTER

5

Bushwhack Trap

It was the last and darkest hour before dawn and another big herd was coming up out of Chihuahua, moving with only the low moan now and then of a tired steer. The riders were a dark-faced bunch,

and break that mill and get that damned herd choused on across and into the brush! Those horses and the Cahill kid and old man Terrazas are liable to be showing up here any minute." And he was adding example to his words, spurring his horse down out of the brush toward the river with Big Sandy O'Shea and Tate Skelton right in behind him. Their whole carefully laid bushwhack trap was being disrupted.

It was brutally done, hard fast work, but the mill was quickly broken once determined men rode into it without regard for life nor limb and stopped its turning. Fortunately the water was shallow, for in swimming water such a feat would have been almost impossible. Tate Skelton, being the best cowman of the three, had taken over command and now led the way out of the river onto Texas soil.

"Let Tate's crew and my boys take them and get them scattered," Dutch Mike called as he rode up with O'Shea. "You call that greaser bunch of yours out here. I want the ears of that fool that started the mill."

"You'll only get one because I'm going to make him keep the other," Big Sandy yelled back.

"Keep it hell!" the gambler exclaimed. "It won't do him any good—I'm going to gut shoot him. This could spoil the whole stew."

"You handle your crew and I'll handle mine," O'Shea said pointedly, then stood in his stirrups as he raised his voice in a call for his vaqueros.

But the Mexican crew seemed slow in responding, staying with the herd as the last of the drags left the river and moved on across the narrow strip of sand into the mouth of the canyon. O'Shea reined after them, raising his insistent bellow again. A single vaquero seemed to hear and turn his horse back toward them. That same moment someone called out behind, "You wished to see me, Señor?"

Dutch Mike grunted and reined half around. "Who's this?" he demanded softly and O'Shea glanced back to see a lone rider coming out of the river. There was the dull gleam of silver upon him from the embroidered tip of his high-peaked sombrero down to the low riding tips of his *tapaderas*. And the big horse carrying him was the rich color of newly minted gold. Here was a *muy grande caballero*, one of a vanishing race, materializing here out of the darkness over the Rio Grande like a spectre riding out of the past.

AND then Big Sandy O'Shea sucked in a rasping breath, softly exclaiming, "Why that's old Don Terrazas!" He socked the spur into his horse, jerking the poor animal around and jumping him into a run toward this newcomer. O'Shea was up in his stirrups, his gun out and chopping down for the first shot.

"Grandfather! Ride away from this," a voice cried out behind big Dutch Mike. He wheeled back to the canyon mouth to see the lone rider who had turned toward them coming now on the run and he realized suddenly what had happened. He pulled his gun and shot while Bill Cahill was still anxiously watching the old don, now driving in with a silver mounted gun sending shot for shot back at O'Shea.

The gambler's lead glazed the top of Bill Cahill's right shoulder, numbing it so that he almost lost the grip on his gun. He threw his weight with his horse as he reined quickly in a sharp, dodging turn as if cutting a steer, and Dutch Mike's second shot fanned through air where he had just been. By then he was right on top of the gambler and swinging his own gun for a shot. But the weight of shock still hung upon his arm and fingers. He squeezed the trigger a fraction too late and his horse had carried him past.

Bill Cahill wheeled his pony sharply, knowing Dutch Mike would get him in

the back if he was slow about it and let the gambler bring his horse around first. As he came around he saw a vaquero charging out of the canyon and recognized old Juan coming to his don's assistance. Then a second horseman came bursting from the brush of a side-slope above the canyon, and the cry of Ranger Captain Grant Haley pierced the night: "That Dutchman's my meat, boy! You leave him to me and get Skelton. Twenty years I've waited to catch him redhanded receiving contraband. Watch your back, tinhorn—I'm coming at yuh!"

Dutch Mike hesitated, glancing from Bill to the oncoming horseman, then wheeled his mount back to meet the ranger. Bill took time for a glance toward the river where his grandfather had gone to battle with Big Sandy O'Shea. He looked just in-time to see a bullet from Juan de Risa's gun snatch O'Shea's .45 away. Then he heard his grandfather's ringing voice raised, challenging Big Sandy to the vaqueros' war by reatas, the grim contest in which the first rider to fit a loop around his enemy, turn his horse and let it run until all life had been dragged out of the vanquished.

Then Bill was spurring for the canyon. All hell seemed to have broken out up there as a half-dozen Terrazas vaqueros and two rangers battled fifteen or twenty of Skelton's gunhands and Dutch Mike's smuggler crew. The light here in the canyon was about the poorest possible for accurate shooting and everyone seemed to be trying to make up for it with rapid fire.

Bill passed two or three vaqueros falling back down the canyon before he had gone far. "Come back, Señor!" one cried after him as he raced on. "Their bullets fill the air like a fiery hail. It is death—"

But out of the darkness ahead Bill had caught the voice of big Tate Skelton urging the renegade crew to increased effort. And Skelton was laughing, feeling good

about the lopsided odds. Laughing the way he had in the days when young Bill Cahill had thought he was a little tin god, before he knew that Tate Skelton had really been laughing at him, at the ease with which he had been taken in. Tate was the laughing kind when things went his way and Bill Cahill drove on through the night toward him now determined to put a permanent end to his mocking laughter.

Then the shape of a horseman loomed from the night before him and again the bellowing laugh began ringing upward as Skelton called to his riders who were scattered comb-fashion through the brush of the side-slopes. This time his laughing words broke off in mid-sentence as he saw Bill materialize and come on at him.

"Bill Cahill coming at you!" Bill cried. "Throw your gun away or use it."

And then both men were pulling down almost at point-blank range. This time Bill knew he did not miss. But as the recoil hit his hand something slammed into him that felt like a belly blow. It jerked him forward over his saddlehorn without having a chance to fire a second shot before their horses carried them past each other. This thing had to be ended quickly. The gunfire from the crew combing the brush on the slopes above had died abruptly and in another moment they would all be heading down here to find out what the trouble was.

BILL braced himself weakly against the fork with his gun hand as he brought his horse around. Then he reined up and raised his gun again as Tate Skelton once more faced him. He began firing in a coolly detached way as if it was just a simple unhurried reflex and not a strained and desperate action. His head felt airy and he had no awareness of sitting the saddle as the dulling shock spread through him, but he kept firing. And he saw Tate Skelton taking lead, saw him shudder but

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keep fighting back, as if by habit.

Then Bill's gun was snapping on empties, but Tate Skelton still sat his saddle on the other side of the narrow interval of darkness between them. The brush on the side-slopes was popping as gun-fighters crashed their horses through it, coming down into the canyon on the run to investigate the ruckus.

As if some awareness of his plight penetrated Bill's befogged mind he straightened himself suddenly, pulling the slack out of his sagging body, putting his weight back into his stirrups as he dropped the empty hand gun and reached for his carbine.

Bill raised the carbine as Skelton moved to lift his gun again. Bill stirred his standing horse, knowing he was too weak to aim, moving in too close to miss. He closed on Skelton with the gun barrel thrust before him, the stock braced against his thigh. He came close enough to see the blood beginning to come from Skelton's twisted mouth, close enough to see the hate and fear and unbelief mingled in big Tate's pain-glazed, closing eyes. Then his gun muzzle struck Skelton in the belly. And before he could squeeze the trigger the big, tough, swaggering cowman toppled from his saddle.

Just behind Bill riders were breaking out of the side brush into the little open space of the trail at the bottom of the canyon. And his carbine was already too heavy to hang on to longer. He dropped it and let himself slump forward over the saddlehorn.

His next awareness was of a small, cool hand upon his forehead. He opened his eyes and found Chiquita holding his head in her lap.

"Señor Bill, you've come back!" she exclaimed softly with relief.

"Why is it now Señor Bill, Chiquita?" he said with a mind to tease and was surprised to hear his voice come only as a

LAW OF FIRE

whisper. "I thought I was your Billito."

She shook her dark head slowly and it set her long, soft tresses dancing. Here and there a ray of golden light caught in them, glowing like a tiny, fiery jewel. And Bill realized this was the golden light of a new day, of a newly risen sun he saw dancing through her hair. "Billito is no longer a proper name for you, except to your wife or mother or sweetheart, Señor Bill," Chiquita said.

Bill managed a faint smile. "Then Billito is your name for me still, if you think perhaps I'm battle-scarred enough now to be worthy of the honor of being your husband."

Her dark eyes clouded as if he had done her a hurt. She laid a small, trembling finger across his lips. "Do not again speak of such things, I beg you, Señor Bill Cahill. Once before when you joked of it I told you it was not for me even to dream of. For I am but the granddaughter of Juan de Risa, a faithful Terrazas servant. A great vaquero, yes, and a family with generations of honor and high position with their Terrazas masters—but still their servants. It is not fitting—"

BILL'S forefinger across her pleading lips cut her off. With his other hand he gripped her by the shoulder to make her listen. "There is one great blessing that Texas and the other United States have over Mexico with its noble families and rich traditions," he told her firmly. "North of that border marked by the river there behind us, a man can marry any girl he pleases. He's not bound by blood lines, like he is in selecting a prize horse or a cow. With a horse or a cow it's his head's business to tell him which one is best. But with a girl, with his sweetheart, with his love—don't you see, that's a business only his heart knows and so he listens to what his heart tells him."

THE END

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(Continued from page 68)

careful about unloading and cleaning it.

Shorty was dead. It wasn't this hair-triggered gun that got him killed. It wasn't the mistake he made in not killing Wes Richards when he had him over the barrel. It went a long, long ways back, to something I never would know or cared to know about—some twist of what is called Fate. Shorty didn't want that to happen to me. Big Jimmer didn't want it to happen. Nor my folks. I was just a bald faced kid. It was time I got outa the notion of hankering to start down the Outlaw Trail. Time outlaws like Kid Curry and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid stopped being my tin gods a-horseback. I took stock of myself. It was like I grew up overnight and I'd seen aplenty. I knew how it felt to want to kill a man. Now I was glad that it wasn't me that had used a gun. I opened my warsack and found a clean black silk neckerchief and wrapped the gun in it.

Then I went out and looked up at the sky. The moon was going down and I watched it set. Somewhere inside of me was a prayer but I didn't know how to put it into words. I knew the sun would rise and I'd ride fence with the nosebag full of staples and a claw hammer. I'd watch my shadow as I rode along. I was young and the dreams of youth would return. I was thankful for all that and a lot more than that. Shorty would rest easy in his unmarked grave.

You don't often here that old song called "Hell Among The Yearlin's." Whenever you do it's never sung by any yodelers with guitars. You're more apt to hear it sung off a long ways from civilization. Whenever I hear it, the song conjures up Shorty on the big apaloosa riding up the frozen Missouri, the sharp calks of the horseshoes crunching cadence to the off-key song.

THE END

NO DEAL FOR A DRIFTER

(Continued from page 33)

was Reno Blair killed your dad, Vyda. He and Clayton planned this for a long time—"His breathing was heavy and he rested awhile. He seemed to be thinking back.

Arizona propped himself up on his elbows. He was dying and he was using his last burst of strength. He looked at Vyda Smith and Cal Herren and he laughed. "But this time I was a sucker," he said. "Like a chump playing stud. This time I got tangled up in a love affair. Nobody can whip that. Not even Arizona—" He dropped back on the pillow and he was gone.

They drove the combined herd to Dodge that year, Vyda Smith and Cal Herren. Only now she was Vyda Herren and she seemed to like it. They talked about it a lot—about Arizona and about what he had said. And sometimes at night when the moon was big over the prairie and the coyotes were making their senseless jabber they'd kiss and agree that the gunman was right. Nothing but trouble ever came out of fighting love, regardless of where you thought your duty might lie.

THE END

BLACK DEATH

(Continued from page 48)

"He's got work of his own to do, too," Marshal Williams said, approaching from the wagon. "I took a look at that catwalk board, son. Looks to me like old J. B. wanted you to be his partner again. Which means he never sold the herd, like Brownley claimed. I reckon we can prove that."

Gilson grinned. Suddenly he felt light-hearted, happy, and he knew this was because he had learned at last that the old man had not died hating him, had never hated him in fact.

And that, Gilson reflected, was what he wanted to know.



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